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THE VERSE-EPISTLES OF ROBERT BURNS: A CRITICAL STUDY

by

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## PREFACE

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## INTRODUCTION

So vast is the body of published work on Burns that one must justify yet another study of the poet. From 1786 to the present, his life and poetry have always had popular appeal. In his lifetime, he was an object of attention to all classes of society, from Ayrshire peasants to the habitués of Edinburgh drawing-rooms, and detractors, idolaters, and disinterested parties have continued to scrutinize his achievements and failings. Popular attention has never wavered. In the nineteenth century especially, many and varied editions of Burns's poetry were published to satisfy this curiosity. Some were lavish, some cheap; some accurate, others, wildly imaginative. Nor has this demand noticeably slackened in the present century. Not a year passes without some book or pamphlet, albeit ephemeral, being published on Burns.

To the scholarly mind, "popular", when applied to Burns studies, usually implies superficiality and this assumption all too often proves correct. It can hardly be said that the best minds of each age since Burns's death have considered him worthy of their critical attention in the way that Shakespeare, or Dante, or Milton have engaged scholars, editors, and publishers in succeeding generations. Byron, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Emerson, Carlyle, and MacDiarmid have commented on Burns, and in the nineteenth century important and durable editorial work was undertaken. Nevertheless, it remains true that it was not until the twentieth century, and then only in bursts, that there developed a scholarly, academic interest to match the popular enthusiasm for Robert Burns.

The work of J.C. Dick on Burns's songs and J. DeLancey Ferguson's edition of the poet's letters are notable early contributions to a more accurate study of Burns. The biographical

studies of Hecht, Snyder, and Ferguson, though not entirely trustworthy, are much superior to any previous publication. Other landmarks in the development of a more rigorous and demanding criticism of Burns's work are the articles published by Fitzhugh in the 1930's and the conservative editing of the Burns Chronicle from 1926 to 1948 by J. C. Ewing. Equally important were the criticisms of C. M. Grieve who, under the pseudonym "Hugh MacDiarmid", charged Burns with anti-intellectualism and heaped scorn on the unthinking acceptance of Burns as a major literary figure, as symptomatic of a national malaise:

No' wan in fifty kens a wurd Burns wrote  
But misapplied is a'body's property,  
And gin there was his like alive the day  
They'd be the last a kennin' haund to gie

Croose London Scotties wi' their braw shirt fronts  
And a' their fancy freen's, rejoicin'  
That similah gatherings in Timbuctoo,  
Bagdad - and Hell, nae doot - are voicin'

Burns' sentiments o' universal love,  
In pidgin' English or in wild-fowl Scots,  
And toastin' ane wha's next to them but an  
Excuse for faitherin' Genius wi' their thochts.<sup>1</sup> (ll. 41-52)

An adequate response to this iconoclastic view did not appear until 1950, when Daiches published his study of Burns, although Edwin Muir's essay (in an uneven collection edited by W. Montgomerie in 1947) may be regarded as one influential critic's reply to MacDiarmid's challenge. From Daiches' book one can legitimately date the modern phase of Burns scholarship. The balanced critical insight shown there was supplemented throughout that decade by several important articles by American scholars such as A. H. MacLaine and by Scots like Murison and Kinghorn. In 1959, there was published a valuable compilation of secondary material, edited by J. Strawhorn and others,

<sup>1</sup>Hugh MacDiarmid, A Drunk Man Looks At The Thistle (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1926), pp. 2-3.

and the decade ended with the appearance of T. Crawford's influential assessment of Burns's life and work. This panoptic synthesis was soon followed by studies of a more particular nature from, among others, Kinsley, Bentman, and Weston.

The two books by Daiches and Crawford sought to provide a comprehensive review of the poet's work such that Burns would be recognized as a major figure by the variety and scope of his achievement. To this extent, these two critics were firmly in the tradition of such nineteenth-century editors as Hatley Waddell, Scott Douglas, and Wallace. In conjunction with this critical method, however, there had always existed another which aimed at examining in depth one particular aspect of Burns's work. Often, this had amounted to nothing more than articles like "The Fauna and Flora of Burns".<sup>2</sup> However, Dick's seminal study of the songs and Ferguson's painstaking editing of Burns's correspondence showed how exhaustive work on a restricted area could prove fruitful. The studies of Egerer and Roy in bibliography, of Skinner on authentic portraits of the poet, and of Werkmeister on Burns's complex relationship with the London press, continued this tradition. The appearance, in 1968, of Kinsley's edition of Burns's poems and songs gave fresh impetus to both the comprehensive and specialized traditions.<sup>3</sup> Scholars now have a stable text, a mass of accessible, valuable annotation, and the music necessary for the true appreciation of Burns's lyric poetry. In 1971, the most recent critical biography of Burns appeared. Fitzhugh's book

<sup>2</sup>D. M'Naught, "The Fauna and Flora of Burns," Burns Chronicle, OS 5 (1896), 19-33.

<sup>3</sup>James Kinsley, ed., The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, 3 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968). Henceforth, all quotations from Burns's poetry will be taken from this edition, unless otherwise stated. Specific poems will be referred to in an abbreviated form. Thus, "Tam o' Shanter" will be cited as K321, and similarly for other poems.

is an unsatisfactory work, in which too much is attempted and what is achieved is poorly organized, but specialist studies have fared rather better. In the 1970's, we have seen the publication of a collection of critical essays, each of which focuses on particular areas of interest. The editor of this book, Donald Low, has also published an illuminating series of early reviews of Burns which chart the fluctuations his poetic and biographical stock underwent until 1859. There have also been articles of a high standard by R. Bentman, by T. Crawford on Burns's political lyrics, by Weston on Burns's satire, and by Kinsley on the poet's innovating adaptation of Scottish traditions.

I intend that my thesis be seen as a contribution to this tradition of specialized study, and in what follows I shall undertake the first complete study of Robert Burns's epistolary verse. As I shall show, other scholars have read these poems with enthusiasm and perception. I differ from my predecessors, however, in that I am able to devote considerably more space to the study of these superb poems, and can, therefore, offer a more exhaustive and comprehensive study than has hitherto been attempted.

Burns's epistolary verse was early recognized as meriting critical attention. James Sibbald was the probable author of a review, published in 1786, in which Burns's "Epistle to a Brother Bard" (K57) was quoted as an illustration of the poet's genius.<sup>4</sup> Henry Mackenzie thought that Burns's "'Epistles to a young Friend' (K105), and to W. S - n (K59)'" revealed to all" ... with what uncommon penetration and sagacity this Heaven-taught ploughman, from his humble and unlettered station, has looked upon men and manners."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Edinburgh Magazine, or Literary Miscellany, Oct. 1786, pp. 284-88.

<sup>5</sup>Lounger, 9 Dec. 1786.

An unsigned review of 1787 quotes part of the "Epistle to Davie" (K51) as an example of "harmonious versification."<sup>6</sup> However, the first flash of critical insight into the epistles is to be found in Robert Heron's criticism. In the following extract, he reveals his awareness of the importance to Burns of an audience of critical, though sympathetic, acquaintances:

A masonic song, a satirical epigram, a rhyming epistle to a friend, attempted with success, taught him to know his own powers, and gave him confidence to try tasks more arduous, and which should command still higher bursts of applause.

Until the publication of Currie's edition in 1800, however, all judgements were based on sparse evidence. Though his editorial practices cannot be commended, he did make available a greater number of epistles and threw new light on the genesis of certain poems. In the generalizing fashion of poetic criticism of the time, he caught the true spirit of some of Burns's best epistolary verse: "The epistles of Burns ... discover ... 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."<sup>8</sup> Cromek printed several more previously inedited epistles and provided scanty annotation, but it was Francis Jeffrey who first noticed Burns's affinity, in certain epistles, with English poets, like Swift.<sup>9</sup> The most acute early commentary on the epistles comes

<sup>6</sup>Universal Magazine, May 1787, pp. 260-62.

<sup>7</sup>Monthly Magazine, June 1797, p.215.

<sup>8</sup>[James Currie, ed.], The Works of Robert Burns (Liverpool: Cadell and Davies, 1800), I, 305.

<sup>9</sup>R.H. Cromek, Reliques of Robert Burns (London: Cadell and Davies, 1808). Jeffrey's criticism is contained in an unsigned review of Cromek's book in the Edinburgh Review, Jan. 1809, pp. 249-76.



from Josiah Walker. His shrewd remarks on Burns's prose letters apply with equal force to his epistles in verse: "Burns could diversify his style, with great address, to suit the taste of his various correspondents. ... In short, ... 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."<sup>10</sup> His judicious speculation on the genesis of the "Epistle to Davie" (K51) and his comments on the way in which Burns's social and personal situation control his poems are as refreshing as they are rare at this period.<sup>11</sup> Hazlitt, too, has a brief but perceptive passage on Burns's epistles, but, although he accurately notes the "affectation" of the "prose-letters", he unfortunately fails to extend this insight into a criticism of the epistolary verse.<sup>12</sup>

The nineteenth-century's most important contributions to the study of Burns was in editorial work, yet the most famous editions rarely contain literary criticism of a high order. This is particularly true of Burns's epistolary verse. The edition of Hogg and Motherwell, published in 1834, is notable largely for Hogg's idiosyncratic notes, although it does preserve valuable local traditions surrounding some of Burns's correspondents. Cunningham's

<sup>10</sup>Walker, who had known Burns personally, wrote the critical appraisal which forms Appendix 2 of James Morison's edition of 1811. See Poems by Robert Burns (Edinburgh: Trustees of the Late James Morison, 1811), II, 327-28.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., II, 308-309 and 342-43.

<sup>12</sup>Complete Works of William Hazlitt, ed. P.P. Howe, V (London: Dent, 1930), 139.

edition, published in 1834, contains much that is interesting but he is so inventive in his treatment of local gossip that one ought to accept his statements with the greatest of caution. Nevertheless, he was aware of the cathartic value of expression in verse and recognizes the epistles as a unique group of poems. His critical judgments, however, are erratic. Chambers' editorial method is quite different. Whereas Cunningham had used Burns's letters to illustrate the poems, Chambers uses the poems as a source of biographical information with the result that the text is scattered through four volumes. He is surprisingly reluctant to offer criticism of the poems, possibly in the belief that setting them in their biographical context made further elucidation unnecessary. If it is possible, Hately Waddell's edition is even more infuriating in its organization. However, as one would expect of a minister, he assiduously notes Biblical echoes in Burns's epistles. He also sets Burns in a wider context by comparing his epistolary verse with the work of Horace, and prints verse-epistles from the poet's correspondents, thus enabling one to judge Burns's achievement against the verse of his lesser contemporaries.

When Scott Douglas's edition appeared, over the years 1877 to 1879, it was seen to be the most correct and scholarly work to date. His concern was to establish an accurate and complete text. Annotation is, therefore, sparse, and almost exclusively textual. There is little literary criticism. Important though Scott Douglas's edition was, it was superseded in 1896 by the publication of two editions which were surpassed only recently by Kinsley's edition. I refer, of course, to the work of Henley and Henderson, and the revision of Chambers' 1856 edition by William Wallace. The former brought a new rigour and insight to the editing of Burns, supplying annotation which sets him firmly in his social context and

within recognized literary traditions. Literary criticism is largely reserved for Henley's controversial essay, where his strictures have the merit of being readable in their wrong-headedness. His view of Burns as "the last of a school" gives him a distorted view of the poet's debt to the tradition of vernacular epistolary verse: "He was the last of a school ... Not only does he take whatever the Vernacular School can give in such matters as tone, sentiment, method, diction, phrase; but also, he is content to run in debt to it for suggestions as regards ideas and for models in style. Hamilton of Gilbertfield and Allan Ramsay conventionalise the Rhymed Epistle; and he accepts the convention as it left their hands, and produces epistles in rhyme which are glorified Hamilton-Ramsay"<sup>13</sup> Wallace, in revising Chambers, produced, in fact, a new edition which, nevertheless, suffers from its awkward arrangement. He responded readily to the epistles, however, and echoes Pope in his praise of their excellence.

Thus, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century criticism of the epistles is sporadic and uneven. Individual poems are quoted as evidence of Burns's obvious merits as moralist or versifier, but there is little closely argued literary criticism. The major achievement of the nineteenth century was to uncover texts and gather information; the real work of literary criticism is undertaken only in the twentieth century, and, at first, quite incidentally.

Ritter and Hecht, German scholars, paved the way - Ritter, by his detection of Burns's borrowings from a wide range of literary sources, and Hecht, by his shrewd appreciation of the social circum-

<sup>13</sup>W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, eds., The Poetry of Robert Burns (Edinburgh: T. C. Jack, 1896), IV, 270-71.

stances out of which Burns's early epistolary verse was written. Hecht's biography was followed by the works of Snyder and Ferguson. The former was more concerned with fixing accurately the details of Burns's life than with literary criticism, and his struggle to produce a "tidy" life makes him insensitive to the poet's frequent autobiographical licence in the epistles. Ferguson's biography is ill-organized and repetitive, but he understands the attraction, for Burns, of the opportunities for self-dramatization inherent in the epistle. With the stabilization of prose and poetic texts, with accurate accounts of his social and literary background available in biographies, and with the appearance of much valuable secondary material in the Burns Chronicle, the 1940's would seem to have been an appropriate time for specialized study of the epistles as a coherent whole. However, as the above pages show, until Daiches published his critical biography in 1950, there was very little criticism of the epistles at all. There, for the first time, the epistles are shown to be mature and important poems. Daiches aids our understanding of them by sketching accurately the different social contexts out of which Burns wrote. He notes the crucial importance to Burns of an audience, and convincingly analyzes the roles which his epistolary correspondents played in determining the development of his epistles. He rightly points to the malign influence which Burns's consciousness of rank had on the verse written to his social superiors, demonstrating his failure in succinct readings of individual poems. Daiches' greatest contribution to the study of the epistles is, perhaps, his conviction that these poems merit close critical scrutiny. No longer could they be regarded as mere aids to biographers.

Crawford's book is the next major landmark in criticism of the epistles, and in 1964 W. L. Renwick provided an elegant and perceptive analysis of a single poem in which he noted the twin

characteristics of the epistolary form; an epistle is at once a personal address to a correspondent, and a piece of dramatic self-expression. Crawford's acute criticism showed Burns to be a major European literary figure, whose verse could withstand and repay detailed study. He divides Burns's epistolary verse into two broad groups, the earlier and later epistles. In choosing to present the epistles thus, Crawford can make telling comparisons between poems. Moreover, he is able to specify some of the important themes which figure in these poems constantly - the contrast between wealth and poverty, the saving power of physical love, the benefits of inspiration, and the superiority of experience to mere learning. He recognizes the wonderful spontaneity of the early epistles and their necessary place in Burns's development as man and poet. In a deliberate attempt to insist on the serious thought in these poems and to demonstrate the talent which underlies a surface slickness, Crawford makes little use of biography as a critical tool. This is unfortunate, but understandable, given that he wished to present Burns the poet and not the usual portrait of womaniser, fornicator, and pawky crony.

Kinsley's edition of the poems and songs will remain standard for years to come, and rightly so. His editing of the epistles is sound, and, to illuminate the texts, he gathers, in his notes, much background material that would otherwise have remained scattered and difficult of access. Like Crawford, he invites comparison between the epistles to show how Burns's mind could happily accommodate conflicting concepts. In a valuable appendix, he gives his reasons for excluding from the canon certain epistles ascribed to Burns by earlier and less fastidious editors. <sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 1.

Although Kinsley's edition marked the recognition of Burns as a major poet, there was, as yet, no major study of his epistolary verse. In fact, the first extended research devoted exclusively to Burns's verse-epistles, and benefiting from the use of Kinsley's standard text, was that published in 1970 by John C. Weston.<sup>15</sup> In his article, he limits himself to Burns's use of the Scots verse-epistle, and as his work is the only detailed study to date, I shall summarize his argument below. In his eyes, the essential characteristic of the Scots verse-epistle before Burns is "... an intent to express an entertaining show of friendship in the manner of Habbie Simson." Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield, in whose practice the verse-epistle originated, wrote epistles which are "... from the first ... homely, old-fashioned, and rustic in ... images and diction." They inherited "only the popular part of the national literary tradition" with the result that, in their hands, the Scots verse-epistle is not an appropriate vehicle for serious, or wittily urbane poetry. According to Weston, it relies for its effects on crude, knockabout humour and backslapping camaraderie. When Robert Fergusson, therefore, came to write his only important (of two) verse-epistles, Scots epistolary verse was neglected because of its "low and outmoded associations." However, by adding "his own brand of seamy city realism", Fergusson rejects "the rural matter of Habbie" and, for the first time, uses the Scots verse-epistle "to reflect a distinctively individual, not a conventional vision". Burns, in the eighteen months when he wrote "all his Scots epistles", used the epistle as Fergusson had done to "express a personal view of the world" and, distinctively, to dramatize himself "according to a vision which he had allowed to

<sup>15</sup>John C. Weston, "Robert Burns's Use of the Scots Verse-Epistle Form," PMLA, 49(1970), 188-210.

form in his mind ... during the course of at least two years." According to Weston, Burns found the verse-epistle "a perfect means" of "dramatically projecting" this persona. He could not, however, shake himself free of the conventions of the genre, with the result that he includes much in the self-portrait that is merely traditional, although Weston concedes that he did change the form radically by introducing "serious matter" and by expressing "a real world". To retain "the formula of an elite group in conflict with the majority", Burns presents himself "as leading a campaign to bring Scots song to Ayrshire". Nevertheless, in realizing the form's potential, he was led, irresistably, into lapses of taste and could not "escape altogether the self-conscious tone of buffoonery associated with the matter of Habbie."

There are grave errors, I would contend, in this argument, and if I mention them only briefly here, it is because I address myself to them more fully in my critical readings of the epistles in the chapters which follow. Firstly, I cannot accept Weston's characterization of the Scots epistolary tradition. I shall show it to be far more varied in form and serious in intention than Weston allows. Secondly, he has an erroneously deterministic view of the effect of tradition on Burns, and has failed to recognize those aspects of the tradition to which Burns responded most readily. Moreover, although he has noted the superiority of the epistles which the poet wrote in Mauchline, his narrow and insensitive view of the epistolary tradition requires that he reject as unimportant later epistles, which cannot be accommodated in his scheme without distortion. He sees Burns's use of the epistle as essentially selfish, whereas I shall demonstrate that he used it as a means of building a network of sympathetic friends.

Had Weston's conception of the Scots verse-epistle not

been so narrow, he would have realized that Ramsay, far from inheriting only the popular part of the Scottish literary tradition, was, in fact, acquainted with a wide and varied range of early Scottish and contemporary English poetry, and that the epistolary verse of the latter especially influenced his own practice in that form. He overestimates the importance of Fergusson's tiny output of epistolary poetry, and fails to recognize the value of his vernacular verse in other genres as a contributing factor to Burns's skill in handling the "Standart Habby" form. It is certainly true that Burns needed the opportunity for self-expression and self-dramatization which the verse-epistle offered, but I cannot accept Weston's argument that the epistle was the mould into which the poet merely had to pour the molten stream of raw character. It was, rather, the experimental crucible in which Burns discovered himself. There, he could combine the disparate elements of his personality with a freedom that led to new and exciting creations.

The most recent critical work on Burns which has relevance for a study of the epistles is to be found in essays by Ian Campbell and Alexander Scott.<sup>16</sup> Campbell regards Burns's awareness of audience and of the spirit of the community as important features in determining the structure and strategy of "Death and Doctor Hornbook" (K55). I shall show that a similar awareness informs Burns's epistolary verse and, like Campbell, "illustrate how ... an application of biography and social history may assist the criticism of literature" (p.46). Scott's article has important consequences for any study of the epistolary verse. His examination of the intensely local context of the early satires reveals not only the dangers to the iconoclast, Burns, from clerical authority, but also shows the opportunities for

<sup>16</sup> Ian Campbell, "Burns's Poems and their Audience," in Critical Essays on Robert Burns, ed. D.A. Low (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 39-53, and Alexander Scott, "The Satires: Underground Poetry," *ibid.*, pp. 90-105.



telling satire in close acquaintance with a sharply-defined social grouping.

This summary of the criticism of Burns's verse-epistles has shown that one can indeed justify an extensive study which will specialize in these poems alone. Although they were recognized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as among his greatest poetic achievements, they have, nevertheless, been comparatively poorly served in terms of critical examination. Apart from the random insights of a few editors in the nineteenth century and some suggestive comments by twentieth-century biographers, competent study of the epistles as a distinct group may be dated only from 1950. The books of Daiches and Crawford signalled an upsurge of critical interest in Burns's poetry. However, although scholars have since specialized in other rewarding aspects of his work, the only detailed study of the epistles remains Weston's unsatisfactory article. In what follows, therefore, I intend to correct this by undertaking the first exhaustive study of Burns's epistolary verse.

Verse-epistles were among the earliest mature poetry Burns wrote, and he continued to compose epistolary verse until shortly before his death. These poems, therefore, have the merit of following the curve of the poet's life. The major part of my thesis is devoted to demonstrating the different roles which epistolary poetry played in Burns's life as he moved from one social context to another. I shall argue that the various kinds of verse-epistles which he wrote can be explained by his response to the different societies in which he lived and worked. In the close-knit, stifling, theocratic society that Mauchline was, verse-epistles were a lifeline, an underground channel of communication with forces behind enemy lines; but they could also form his nightclub stage where he performed for a select audience of "hip" friends. In Mauchline, his epistolary

verse could be as strident as a public declamation or as private as the confessional.

I shall show why his greatest verse-epistles were written there, and why, in Edinburgh, he wrote comparatively few, and those of a quite different character and in a very different style. The epistolary verse which he wrote in Ellisland and Dumfries will also be examined, for in it we see Burns coming to terms with changed circumstances, as he realizes how his status and function as a poet have been irrevocably altered by these different social circumstances. However, this thesis seeks to do more than demonstrate the close and necessary connection between Burns' epistolary verse and the record of his life. The epistles offer a unique and exciting challenge to the literary critic. Because of their proximity to actual conversation or living speech at many points, the critic must devise an approach which allows him to convey the fluctuations of a quicksilver mind and a superb ease of expression without heavy-handedness. I have, at least, attempted this and, in some measure, succeeded.

As Weston and others have noted, Burns's epistolary verse is written from within an established poetic tradition. I hope to show that Burns inherited not merely a native epistolary tradition, but that English epistolary verse, as filtered through the sensibilities of Ramsay, Fergusson, and other eighteenth century Scottish poets, greatly influenced his conception of the poet's role and his practice as a poet. Nevertheless, one cannot minimize the importance of the native tradition. I shall show that, in "Standart Habby", Burns had a verse-form uniquely suited, because of its historical development, to rendering the ebb and flow or pell-mell rush of thought and conversation. These, baldly stated, are the main aims of my thesis; to provide a critical reading of the poems which does them justice; to place Burns in a context of epistolary verse

composition in Scotland; and to examine the close and necessary links between Burns's practice as an epistolary poet and his experience of different societies and varying fortune.

The complexity of the tradition which Burns inherited requires close study in its own right. Thus, the epistolary tradition in Scotland and the development of the vernacular stanza in which he wrote his best verse-epistles are examined in Chapter One. The remaining chapters are devoted to a chronological study of the epistles - those written before the visit to Edinburgh, those written at Edinburgh and before Burns had settled permanently in Dumfriesshire, and the epistles composed at Ellisland and Dumfries during the last eight years of his life. For each period, I have tried to provide an accurate picture of the community in which Burns wrote, and in my critical readings I trace the interaction between the poet and the members of that society as expressed in his epistolary poetry. Finally, in the last chapter, I set forth the conclusions of this study of Robert Burns's verse-epistles.

## Chapter One

In this chapter, I shall make two crucial points. Firstly, that the epistolary verse models available to Burns were more numerous and diverse than Weston conceives. Secondly, that Burns's vernacular verse-epistles are so successful because the form in which he wrote most of them, the six-line stave known as "Standart Habby", had, by the late eighteenth-century, become a uniquely appropriate form for rendering the ebb and flow of emotion and speech. Though distinctively of the native tradition, it could, nevertheless, accommodate ideas and themes of universal application. To this end, I shall examine briefly how concepts in Burns's epistles, which Weston attributes to the conventions of a trivial vernacular tradition, can, with more justification, be derived from his acquaintance with Augustan epistolary verse. The variety of verse-epistles written on English models, introduced to Scotland and assimilated by Allan Ramsay and perpetuated by later poets, was an important influence on Burns. Those epistles provided him with influential precedents for some of his actions and moral stances, and allowed him to find appropriate expression for ideas which could not have been comfortably assimilated into the tradition of vernacular epistolary poetry.

In conjunction with this body of epistolary verse, there was a tradition of vernacular epistolary composition. Begun, and given classical form, by Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield, it was almost invariably expressed in "Standart Habby" though other stanza forms were used for vernacular verse-epistles. However, the history of the vernacular epistle is the history of "Standart Habby". I shall show why the development of this form before Ramsay, and in his hands, made it a particularly suitable medium for rendering

speech and encouraging self-dramatization. Later in the century, the form was enriched and hardened by Fergusson's use of it in more mature poetry. His combination of intellect and linguistic verve gave the form an appeal for Burns which, without his practice, it could not have had. This chapter is intended to sketch the historical background against which Burns's successes can be more clearly seen, and his debts to earlier poets more accurately measured.

It is now a well-recognized fact that Burns's work reflects his intimacy with poetry other than that published in the vernacular, and this is equally true of his epistolary verse. Scant justice is done to the variety of Burns's verse-epistles by placing him within a single epistolary tradition, and, at the same time, presenting a distorted view of that very tradition, as Weston does. Burns produced a wide range of epistolary verse during his lifetime. He composed epistles in the manner of Pope, and dashed off occasional epistolary verses which are nothing more than his version of the footballer's autograph. He produced verse in which Horatian philosophy bulks large, yet wrote epistles in which sheer verbal vigour belies an impatience with ideals of retirement. He entertained friends in racy, bawdy vernacular, but could address his superiors in stilted English. Weston may be forgiven his decision to concentrate on Burns's place with the vernacular epistolary tradition. However, one must fault his failure to consider the influence of the great variety of other kinds of epistolary verse available to Burns and to earlier Scottish poets, for this omission leads him into grave errors of interpretation.

As an example, I would suggest that Weston is quite wrong to attribute the sentiments of fraternity in Burns's Mauchline epistles to a legacy of trivial, emotional posturing bequeathed by Ramsay and his correspondent, Hamilton of Gilbertfield. Not only is this a

distorted view of the function of friendship in Ramsay's verse-epistles, but this narrow and deterministic notion of epistolary tradition neglects another, and more likely, source for such ideas. I refer to the epistolary poetry of Alexander Pope.

Burns's early acquaintance with Pope bore fruit most notably in his appreciation of the structure of a poem. The careful paragraphing in "The Twa Dogs" (K71), for example, and the subtle contrasts displayed there within units of different length - phrase, line, and couplet - are but one manifestation of a technical skill which owed much to the English poet's example. In his verse-epistles, however, apart from the conscious imitation of the "Epistle to Robert Graham of Fintry" (K230), Burns's debt to Pope is more a matter of identification with a man whose social predicament resembled his own. In Pope's epistolary verse, Burns recognized the voice of one who was fighting against superior odds, and who sought solace and strength in the moral support of like-minded friends. It mattered little to Burns, I suggest, that Pope was a conservative patrician, lamenting the loss of Classical ideals of taste and morality in the face of a philistine onslaught. What he responded to in the English poet was the sense of determined opposition to a dominant and hostile majority, and the high importance placed on poetry as a just and necessary means of resistance. Sections of Pope's "First Satire of the Second Book of Horace Imitated" and his "Epistle from Mr. Pope, to Dr. Arbuthnot" are very similar in spirit to Burns's attitude in "A Dedication" (K103) and "To the Rev. John M'Math" (K68); they reveal a sympathy of outlook regarding the nature of the poet's role which Burns makes explicit in the latter as the poem progresses.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963), pp. 616-17, ll. 91-110, and pp. 608-09, ll. 334-59. Compare with these K103, ll. 1-18 and K68, ll. 25-36.

Burns and Pope are fighting against a hostile attitude which, in the latter's case, threatens to disrupt, and in the former's, to stifle, values which they regard as essential to social cohesion and well-being. Their methods differ. Pope adopts the role of moral superior, gazing with refined distaste and justifiable anger at the antics of moral pygmies. He seizes on their physical defects as external manifestations of inner flaws; he recounts with relish damaging anecdotes of their waste and ignorance to an audience who share his standards, and who need only listen to this rich, allusive stream of invective and self-justification to pass judgement. From the comfortable independence of his Twickenham grotto, Pope regards the outside world with sorrowing scorn. Burns, however, does not snipe from without. Rather, he builds from within, and like a constructor of systems his method is enticingly simple. He does not retreat to an island of calm at the centre of the storm, but instead creates a model society as an alternative. His epistles are, predominantly, rhapsodic in their sweep and visionary in outlook. In them, he offers prospects of his alternative society and exhortations on the desirability of attaining it. Yet, despite these differences, both poets are united in the belief that theirs is the only just cause. Burns comes to save, Pope to wither, but each knows that he cannot achieve his purpose alone. The support of others is essential. Burns's appreciation of small-group values, therefore, as expressed in his early epistolary poetry, is not the backslapping camaraderie of a lifeless tradition, but the poetic expression of a set of ideals and standards shared with the greatest poet of the previous generation.

It is obvious that Burns's vernacular epistolary poetry cannot be adequately considered simply as the final stage in the development of a native tradition. We must consider the verse-

epistle in greater depth and examine the various forms it took if we are to appreciate Burns's range. He is, as the above comparison shows, deeply indebted to earlier epistolary poetry, native and non-native. If we are to savour his innovating genius to the full, we must examine the legacy he inherited.

The eighteenth-century found the verse-epistle well-nigh indefinable, for it was not recognized as one of the poetic "kinds" in the way that epigram, or ode, or elegy was. In Spectator 618 the authors (probably Tickell and Philips), writing of "the Epistolary way of writing in Verse", define the problem thus. "This is a species of Poetry by itself; and has not so much as been hinted at in any of the Arts of Poetry, that have ever fallen into my Hands; Neither has it any Age, or any Nation, been so much cultivated, as the other several Kinds of Poesie."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Joseph Trapp recognized the confusion in classification, and identified the epistle's distinctive quality as essentially one of style. "Many Elegies are writ in the Epistolary Manner ... Satire may be writ on the Dialogue or Epistolary Manner, and we have instances of both forms in Horace, Juvenal, and Persius. As some of Horace's which are called Satires, are as truly Epistles; so many of his Epistles might as well be called Satires."<sup>3</sup> To write epistolary verse was to treat a subject in a particular style - in an intimate, familiar, discursive manner. As proof, Dryden uses Horace's epistolary poetry as the precedent for the indirectness of his prose argument. "I

<sup>2</sup>The Spectator, ed. D.F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), V, 61.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph Trapp, Lectures on Poetry ..., trans. with notes [Wm. Bowyer and Wm. Clarke] (London: Hitch and Davis, 1742), p.166.



design not a treatise of heroic poetry, but write in a loose epistolary way, somewhat tending to that subject, after the example of Horace, in his First Epistle of the Second Book, to Augustus Caesar, and of that to the Piso's, ... in both of which he observes no method that I can trace ... I have taken up, laid down, and resum'd as often as I pleas'd, the same subject; and this loose proceeding I shall use thro' all this prefatory dedication."<sup>4</sup>

However, one result of this "loose proceeding" was that, by the eighteenth century, the concept of the epistle was vague. It was, in fact, something of a catch-all, as Bell's attempt at exhaustive classification suggests.<sup>5</sup> In its early development, it had been sufficiently wide to include, among others, Wyatt's adaption of Horace's *Satyrae* as an epistle, and it could equally well accommodate the diverse didacticism of Thomas Lodge.<sup>6</sup> The term "epistle" also covered the panegyric addresses of Daniel, Donne's idiosyncratic reasoning, and Jonson's manly argument.<sup>7</sup> The ethic verse-epistle really

<sup>4</sup>The Poems of John Dryden, ed. J. Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), III, 1009.

<sup>5</sup>Bell's Classical Arrangement of Fugitive Poetry, comp. J. Bell, 18 vols. (London: J. Bell, 1790-97). Bell devotes his first seven volumes to all types of epistolary poetry.

<sup>6</sup>Sir Thomas Wyatt Collected Poems, ed. Joost Dalder (London: O.U.P., 1975), pp. 109-12. (Wyatt's "Satire 3" is, in fact, an epistle addressed to Sir Francis Brian). See also Lodge's A Fig for Momus ... in The Complete Works of Thomas Lodge, ed. E. Gosse (Glasgow: Hunterian Club, 1883), III, 2nd pagination, leaves 39-44.

<sup>7</sup>Samuel Daniel Poems, ed. A. C. Sprague (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 116-18; John Donne The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters, ed. W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 71-73; Ben Jonson, ed. Herford and Simpson, VIII (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 218-20.

began its march towards fame in the middle years of the seventeenth century in the philosophic epistles of William Habington.<sup>8</sup> However, these years also saw an increase in the number of essentially insignificant epistles listing the delights of retirement and the attractions of rural landscape, as if written to a formula. By the eighteenth century, the term could include dramatic monologue, rambling narrative, the traditional "ars poetica", moral epistles in an imitative Horatian style, and bawdy story-swapping.

Given the political situation in Scotland in the early eighteenth century, and as a consequence of constitutional decisions taken earlier, it was inevitable that English cultural models would become increasingly dominant as the century progressed. Although it would be wrong to suggest that the traffic in ideas was entirely in one direction or that it met with no opposition, there can be no question of the readiness with which many Scots accepted and emulated the Southern practice. This is as true in epistolary poetry as in other poetic forms, though, as we shall see, the vernacular verse-epistle is essentially an indigenous growth. It remains unique largely because of the eminently suitable stanza-form in which it was written with greatest success. The varied practice of English poets in epistolary verse, as copied, assimilated, and interpreted by Scots, together with their distinctive native contribution, produced a very wide range of epistolary poetry in eighteenth-century Scotland.

Allan Ramsay's work is a convenient and representative example of the variety which the verse-epistle had attained. He is further important, as I shall later show, in giving the vernacular

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, "To my worthy Cousin Mr. E. G."; The Poems of William Habington, ed. K. Allott (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1948), pp. 77-78.

verse-epistle its classical form. He wrote in English, in Scots, and in his idiosyncratic combination of the two. Scottish patriot and Anglophile; whizzing literary dynamo and populist, yet deeply sympathetic to Horatian ideals of patronage and retirement, he was a complex and important literary figure in Edinburgh in the early eighteenth century. His intimate acquaintance with English and Scottish poetry meant that he was uniquely placed to introduce and domesticate English literary models. He performed this function for epistolary verse, producing panegyric epistles, imitations of Horace, moral and didactic epistles in the manner of Pope, occasional "vers de société", and friendly correspondence in the style of Gay whom he so admired. In what follows, I shall examine Ramsay's contribution to the epistle in Scotland, looking first at his epistles in non-native stanza forms. I shall also note how his initial practice was supplemented by the work of other poets throughout the century. This will give a more accurate account of the epistolary models available to Burns, and will correct the belief that he inherited nothing more than a frivolous and degenerate native tradition which he transformed in one brief burst of creativity.

Ramsay was neither a deep nor a consistent thinker, a fact reflected in his verse-epistles. He is most successful when he writes in the style of those English poets, not quite of the first rank, but nonetheless provocative and entertaining - men like Gay and Prior. "An Epistle to Mr. James Arbuckle" is such a poem.<sup>9</sup> Here the emphasis is less on communication than on self-dramatization, and Ramsay manages his humorous self-description with a sly wit. The poem outlines no particular philosophy, nor does it attack a specific vice or abuse. Instead,

<sup>9</sup>The Works of Allan Ramsay, I (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1951 ), 212-17. All further references to Ramsay's work are from this edition, cited henceforth as Ramsay, STS.

it develops in a random, haphazard fashion, as Ramsay rambles on in his wise, self-critical, but tolerant tone. The verse can be precisely balanced, as befits one of such equable temperament, when he specifies the characteristics which distinguish him from other men:

Then for the Fabrick of my Mind,  
'Tis mair to Mirth than Grief inclin'd.  
I rather choose to laugh at Folly,  
Than show Dislike by Melancholy: (ll. 77-80)

In other passages, however, Ramsay achieves an easy, garrulous flow, as if he were chatting in a desultory way to a friend; but the biographical details which he lets slip are deliberately chosen to present a sharply-defined self-portrait. What seems like informality is, in fact, conscious choice on the poet's part to emphasize certain aspects of his character. Burns, too, chooses to reveal only those facets of his personality which are appropriate to the audience for whom his epistle is intended, but he, too, can mask his selection with an air of inconsequentiality.

Other epistles by Ramsay which unite a Scots-English vocabulary with an English form and an Augustan convention are "To Josiah Burchet, Esq." (Ramsay STS I, 113-14) and "To Mr. Joseph Mitchel" (Ramsay, STS I, 239-40). In the former poem, Ramsay casts Burchet in the same mould of the generous, good man as Pope did the "Man of Ross" and Burns Gavin Hamilton; in the latter, he writes in praise of English culture as a civilizing and unifying force. However, neither epistle is oppressively didactic and this line of development is to be taken up by Burns in "The Inventory" (K86). That poem impresses us by its careless ease of expression and seeming inconsequentiality. This illusion, however, is the product of a control over structure, and variation in syntactical pattern which harks back to similar features in Ramsay's verse. Compare, for example, the latter poet's

ironic "Epistle to Robert Yarde of Devonshire," (Ramsay, STS II, 57-61) which also piles up imagery into lists and distorts and exaggerates for comic effect:

What sprightly Tale in Verse can Yarde  
Expect frae a cauld Scottish Bard,  
With Brose and Bannocks poorly fed,  
In Hoden Gray right hashly cled,  
Skelping o'er frozen Hags with Pingle,  
Picking up Peets to beet his Ingle,  
While Sleet that freezes as it fa's,  
Theeks as with Glass the Divot Waws  
Of a laigh Hut, where sax thegither,  
Ly Heads and Thraws on Craps of Heather?       (11. 5-14)

This epistle is also interesting as an example of the way in which Ramsay assimilated the convention of a moral import in Augustan epistolary poetry. From its humorous and patriotic opening, the poem turns "Frae Fancy's Field, these Truths to bring/That you shou'd hear, ... " (11. 35-36), and the remainder examines the tenets by which a representative man should live. The Horatian principles which Ramsay proposed, "a fair competent Estate", "the gowden Mien", and "Reason", derive not only from his reading in Augustan literature, but spring from his knowledge of and deep, sympathetic identification with the poetry of Horace himself. The themes of rural simplicity, virtue, patriotism, and the pleasures of easy, factionless friendship dominate much of Ramsay's total output, and always loom large in his epistolary verse. The attraction of the rural, retiring life was strong for Ramsay. Despite his admiration of Gay, the contemporary poet of London life, he rarely speaks well of the city in which he was such an active, cultural force. It was to be Fergusson, later in the century, who would reverse this trend. By writing major poetry in the vernacular on Edinburgh and the urban condition, he pointed up areas of existence replete with promise and suggestion for future writers.

Many of the couplets in Ramsay's epistle to Yarde have an

admonitory, gnomic force, and, indeed, as befits a nation of moralists, the cautionary epistle, such as Burns's "Epistle to a Young Friend" (K105) was popular throughout the century. This element of warning counsel, the praise of friendship, of Scotland, and of the rural life - Ramsay's moral touchstones -, and an easy colloquial style unite very successfully in the "Answer to the above Epistle From William Somerville" (Ramsay STS II, 186-89). In this poem Ramsay succeeds in reproducing all the smoothness of flow, all the wit and control which we expect of the best Augustan epistolary verse. The hyper-active poet warns against sloth and squandered energy in vivid, telling imagery:

Continue, Sir, and shame the Crew  
That's plagued with having nought to do,  
.....  
Whence Pox and Poverty proceed  
An early Eild, and Spirits dead. (ll. 17-40)

Yet, he never loses that colloquial tone as he builds to the central climatic picture of the good man and honest friend. The challenging, proud patriotism of ll. 59-77 serves to boost Scotland, and more specifically, Edinburgh; at the same time, it facilitates the imaginative vision of ll. 78ff., where he develops his ideas on the function of poetry, and the benefits of a rural existence. Somerville is transmuted into a rather more robust Pope at Twickenham.

Pope's formal verse-epistles were the models for Ramsay's efforts in such poems as "To the Right Honourable George, Lord Ramsay" (Ramsay STS III, 154-56), where, with the biting sketch of Fuscus, Ramsay presents a graphic characterisation of the vices of immoderation and irresponsibility. The ending of this poem, certainly, is rather more familiar than Pope would have allowed himself, but the themes of a fallen, radically-altered world, of the corrective value of poetry, and the image of a representatively virtuous

figure are quite English in conception. The idea of the independence of poets and their corrective, social role is taken up again by Ramsay in "An Epistle to James Clerk, Esq." (Ramsay STS III, 271-74). In this poem, he has " ... sketch'd ... forth the toil and pain/Of them that have their bread to gain" (ll. 91-92). With more colloquialism and thudding force than we would expect in English epistles of the same type, Ramsay, nevertheless, controls his argument effectively, moving from the general to the particular within the space of six packed lines, lines 43-48, and illuminates his general observations by shrewd, narrative cameos. All the experience of the bourgeois bookseller has gone into this poem, especially lines 13-34. Sturdy pride in his financial independence and the probity of his moral conduct are linked as closely in Ramsay's mind as they were in Pope's:

I keep my conscience white and sound;  
 And tho' I never was a rich heaper,  
 To make that up I live the cheaper;  
 By this ae knack I've made a shift  
 To drive ambitious care a-drift;                    (ll. 56-60)

This sense of independence lends the epistle its air of self-confidence and critical freedom; it reminds us irresistibly of similar avowals by Burns of the link between a moderate sufficiency and moral uprightness in his "Epistle to Davie" (K51).

The opportunity to comment critically and extensively was one of the great advantages of the epistolary form. It encouraged a degree of informality in structure and theme which was immediately appealing to Ramsay's eclectic, magpie mind. He often uses it to attack and defend, praise and satirize different themes or characters within the one poem, swaying his audience as a prosecuting counsel would a jury. In " ... An Epistle to Lord Ramsay" (Ramsay STS I, 176-82), the object of his satiric onslaught is speculation, and he attacks it with gusto. His method is to belittle those misguided citizens who "Drap'd ilk Design and jobb'd for Prizes" (l. 42), by

according them no more wit than naive children or duped Indians. At the same time, he discredits the stock-jobbers by similarly uncomplimentary comparisons, calling them "langnebit Juglers" and "cheating Smuglers." The pell-mell rush of his verse and the heterogeneous jumble of ll. 39-44 capture well the topsy-turvy world of speculation with its sudden reversals and transformations of men and society. There, too, we see his "flyting" inheritance which he held in common with Burns, who can also belabour his opponents with similar drubbing mouthfuls of dismissive anger, as in his epistle to M'Math (K68). Ramsay's great talent for narrative, especially sly, humorous narrative recording humanity's flaws and failings, is very evident in this poem. An entire society's morality is dissected with a fascinated and tolerantly amused eye in the tale of the "Handy-crafts-man" (ll. 97-108). Burns, too, was to use the epistle's ability to accommodate a seemingly digressive narrative element for equally serious ends, as we shall see in his "Epistle to J. R\*\*\*\*\*" (K47). The epistle expresses Ramsay's distaste for the social upheaval inherent in the get-rich-quick schemes of speculators, and for wealth gained at the expense of a gullible public, or without effort. The stance of the poet is that of guardian of society's standards; he represents the eternal "status quo", those verities of virtue, honour, work, and responsibility. Ramsay shares this view of the poet's role with Pope. As we shall see, Burns, too, comes to view society's treatment of the poet as the acid test of a community's well being.

This essentially conservative, backward-looking aspect of Ramsay's personality found a natural outlet in the consciously imitative Horatian epistles which he wrote at intervals throughout his life. In "To the Right Honourable, William, Earl of Dalhousie", (Ramsay STS I, 217-219), he muses discursively on the theme of man's varied nature,



producing a series of graphic caricatures to illustrate the diversity of human pleasure. The tone is calm and retiring, that of a man who has found his place and is fully content with it. Careful balancing within lines and between different lines and paragraphs adds to the impression of rest won from struggle, of equilibrium attained. Although Burns never attained such a balance, he employs this technique in his epistle to Graham of Fintry (K230) to stress what a reasoned and reasonable creation is this world. The persistence of this outlook in Ramsay's work may be gauged from its re-appearance in "An Epistle Wrote from Mavisbank" (Ramsay STS III, 261-64), his quintessentially Horatian poem. This is one of his finest achievements in the epistolary genre. Verse-rhythms are skilfully varied to suit the scene described, and the din of a noisy city mirrors the fussy, self-important clamour of politics and affairs of state:

let me advise you, out of pity,  
to leave the chattering, Stinking city,  
.....  
that's through the City gauntlet hurried. (ll. 7-44)

The idyllic peace of the rural retreat where Nature works with and for man, pleasing all his senses, is described in appropriately limpid verse. In this scene, the verbs denoting service are no mere metaphors:

The Heights survey'd, we may return  
along the Margin of the Burn,  
.....  
while Echoe entertains the Ear  
when rais'd by Notes well tune'd, and clear. (ll. 89-102)

Notably, the poem is anti-feminist; they are frivolous creatures, with little place in this world devoted to refined education and studiously cultured refinement. Such an exclusively male outlook is something which we shall encounter again in Burns. Ramsay's idealization of the rural scene is complete. Nature can educate Man to appreciate what is noble, pleasant, and virtuous, and an integral

part of this retiring life are the works of " ... Milton, Pope, and all the Rest/ who smoothly copy Nature best". (ll. 131-32). Ramsay's summary is the most succinct statement of the intention behind this poem:

This is the Life, all those have sung,  
most to be wish'd by old, and young,  
by the most Brave, and the most fair,  
where Least Ambition, least of Care,  
desturbs the Soul, where Virteous Ease,  
and Temperance, never cease to please. (ll. 137-42)

Burns's experience of rustic life would lead him to a less ideal view of Nature but he, too, valued it as a source of wisdom and the home of virtue and truth.

Ramsay's Horatian verse may draw on a common body of tradition and convention, but it remains fresh because of his truly sympathetic response to these ideals. Another type of epistolary poetry, however, cannot be defended thus. I refer to the entirely conventional politeness of vapid poems such as "To Mr. Pope" (Ramsay STS II, 23), "To Mr. William Starrat" (Ramsay STS II, 72), and "To Mr. David Malloch" (Ramsay STS II, 169), among others. Lacking any stamp of individuality, these are merely platitudinous repetitions of sentiments which were common currency for this type of transaction. Such verses became all too common, and Burns was to commit his share of them, as in "To Clarinda" (K219).

Ramsay wrote other epistles which admit of no easy classification in terms of tradition, either English or vernacular, but which read like the authentic voice of the poet himself. The man who shows himself in these poems is independent, yet proud of the patronage he enjoys at the hands of men such as Sir William Bennet or Sir John Clerk; he is an energetic entrepreneur and popularizer of the arts, yet envious of peaceful retirement and a quiet, bookish life. He can view controversy with all the "easiness" beloved of the club he helped to found, yet is quick to take up cudgels in his own defence.

Despite such contradictions - contradictions which explain the uniqueness of these epistles and the appeal, to Ramsay and Burns, of a form which could contain them without incongruity - these epistles always reveal him as a true friend, a boon companion, and a patriot:<sup>10</sup>

My friend be blyth, nor fash your Head  
 .....  
 sleep sound and never break your brains,  
 whither the Turk, or Russian gains,

The same man re-appears in this bustling self-portrait from "To my kind and worthy Friends in Ireland" (Ramsay STS II, 203-04); that poem is crammed with that most active part of the verb, the present participle:

ALLAN's hale, and well, and living,  
 Singing, laughing, sleeping soundly,  
 .....  
 Crooking Burns and flowing Fountains; (ll. 6-18)

As we shall see with Burns's self-descriptions, this is no mere egocentricity. The very expression of Ramsay's condition is designed to give pleasure to an audience. Ramsay's well-being is offered as a challenge to his friends, as a spur to emulation. The "Epistle to John Wardlaw" (Ramsay STS III, 238-40) bulges with visions of plenty and the verses crackle with whirling energy. Throughout, the tone is frenetic and frantic until Ramsay brings the poem to a breathless close:

Wi' trouts, and pikes, and carps, and eels;  
 .....  
 Your bannocks, grow upon your strae  
 Your barley, brings you usquebae. (ll. 40-48)

Such expression of activity and plenty is an important influence, as we shall see, on Burns, in the madcap lists of "The Inventory" (K86), and the spontaneous drive of these lines from "A Dedication to G\*\*\*\* H\*\*\*\*\* " (K103).

<sup>10</sup>"Epistle to Mr. H.S. at London" (Ramsay STS III, pp. 247-49), ll. 91-102.

Learn three-mile pray'rs, an' half-mile graces,  
 Wi' weel spread looves, an' lang, wry faces;  
 Grunt up a solemn, lengthen'd groan,  
 And damn a' Parties but your own; (ll. 61-64)

Of Ramsay's distinctively Scottish epistles, "The Address of Allan Ramsay" (Ramsay STS I, 208-09), written in the "Cherrie and the Slae" stanza, is a formal complaint rather than an epistle, rather like Burns's "Earnest Cry and Prayer" (K81). He directs these verses at a particular abuse, the pirating in Edinburgh of his pastoral poem "Richy and Sandy". With considerable insight, he has chosen a form which encourages the style of legal pleading. The indictment is presented in considerable detail in the first ten lines of each stanza; grievances are elaborated, ramifications outlined, and allegations made. The final four lines, however, are used to drive the point home with pithy force. After presenting his grievance lengthily, Ramsay caps it triumphantly by using the sectional rhyme of the four closing lines to concentrate his complaint. The juxtaposition of "undone" and "London" in line eleven captures the shame he feels at a shoddy and unrepresentative example of his work being exposed for sale in Britain's literary capital.

In addition to this innovative use of the "Cherrie and the Slae" stanza, Ramsay was one of the first to use the vernacular with real verve for epistolary verse. In "Grubstreet nae Satyre" (Ramsay STS III, 33-34), he is remarkably successful in using the dismissive rhythms and vocabulary of the vernacular to ridicule the pseudonymous John Couper:

Dear John, what ails ye now? ly still:  
 Hout Man! What need ye take it ill  
 That Allan buried ye in Rhime,  
 May be a Start afore ye'r Time?

He's nathing but a shire daft Lick,  
 And disna care a Fidle-stick,  
 Altho your Tutor Curl and ye  
 Should serve him sae in Elegy.

Doup down doild Ghaist, and dinna fash us  
 With Carpet Ground, and nervous Clashes;  
 Your Grubstreet Jargon Dryden wounds,  
 When mixt with his Poetick Sounds. (ll. 1-12)

The opening line seems to express all the concern of one who is worried about John's welfare, and the sympathetic, commiserating tone continues until we are alerted in ll. 7 and 8 to the impending, sudden reversal of outlook in ll. 9 and 10, where the alliterative punch of "Doup down doild Ghaist, and dinna fash us", with its slow, sneering monosyllables sends us reeling in surprise. As we are now off balance, Ramsay follows up his advantage, increasing the tempo of the verse by the run-on between ll. 9 and 10. These sentiments are repeated in ll. 11 and 12 when, suddenly, the speed changes again in l. 13 with a distinctively Scottish hoot of ridicule, "You pace on Pegasus! ... " By this stage, like all prudent men, we are on the side of the winner, Ramsay, and are even rather contrite for having been so blind as to mistake the irony of the first few lines. On this assumption of our consent, gained solely by his creative use of the vernacular and its distinctive rhythms, Ramsay proceeds to lay into his adversary with great glee, using irony and other "foul blows" to rout his opponent.

The variety of epistolary verse which Ramsay wrote, outlined briefly above, may be explained by the diversity of appeal which the form held for him. As a clubbable, gregarious man, he recognized the suitability of the epistle as an appropriate means of familiar communication. In the hands of a master like Pope, the verse-epistle attained a cultural pre-eminence which any Scots poet would wish to emulate as proof that he was acquainted with, and could write in, the latest English style. Congenitally sympathetic to Horatian ideals of retirement and patronage, Ramsay flattered those who patronized him and, at the same time, satisfied his own spiritual

needs with his imitations of Horace. As a practising poet, he was aware of the panegyric conventions of certain types of epistolary verse and appreciated their usefulness on appropriate occasions, as a busy man appreciates the short-cut of a telephone. He admired the ease of men like Gay and Prior in their epistolary poetry; in the all-accommodating epistle, he had an eminently suitable form for his expansive, confiding personality. By his practice, Ramsay introduced to Scotland a wide range of epistolary verse, based largely on English models. However, he also domesticated the form by using the vernacular, and by writing epistolary verse successfully in distinctively Scottish political and social situations.

Where Ramsay led, and England called, others were willing to go, witness "Affectation: An Epistolary Satire."<sup>11</sup> This is a free-wheeling comment on the themes of vanity and hypocrisy. The tone is witty and controlled, and the poem is firmly in the tradition of the moral epistle. The author's intention is didactic, but, like a good classicist, he entertains as he illustrates his theme by sketches and characterizations of those who are tainted with the vices. In this portrait of the vain clergyman, the drooling envy and self-deluding rationalization of the man is rendered successfully by an appreciation of living speech:

Why - when the SERVICES are o'er,  
 I'm just the same as heretofore;  
 A member of the busy world,  
 Tho' not by PASSION's caprice whirl'd.  
 Mayn't I indulge, tho' not t'excess,  
 Freedom in either walk, or dress?  
 Marry - this CANE befits me right!  
 'Tis jolly - ministerial like;  
 And I'm prepar'd for self-defence,  
 If meeting e'er with dire offence.  
 BRAVO MONSIEUR! ..... too my hair,  
 It has a grave majestic air;  
 This curl bedaub'd with pommet grease,  
 O'erlaid with flow'r, can't fail to please. (pp. 12-13)

<sup>11</sup> Affectation: An Epistolary Satire, (Glasgow: 1767).

Such accuracy recalls Gay's dissection of the lascivious bitchiness of the fashionable gossip in his "Epistle III: To the Right Honourable William Pulteney." <sup>12</sup>

However, not all the epistles in English which were published in Scotland in the eighteenth century were as entertaining as this. There are all too many poems which exhibit the strained wit of "An Amorous Epistle by a Young Soldier", and the dutifully erotic "To Mrs. H - J - , An Epistle." <sup>13</sup>

Oft as on CLYDE's sweet Bank I gently stray,  
 And wand'ring take my solitary Way,  
 Your dear Idea fills my vacant Mind  
 And gives me all the Joys I left behind.  
 To the known Form (for oft your Form appears,  
 And oft your well known voice alarms my Ears)  
 I turn with fond Delight my ravish'd Eyes,  
 And gaze till into Air the Vision flyes. (ll. 7-14)

In sharp contrast to this ossified verse is Beattie's practice. Though closely modelled on English originals, he can be lively and very funny. In his "Epistle to the Honourable C.B.", he adopts a mocking, modest voice to poke fun at classical, mythological convention, contrasting the plight of the modern bard, who is forced to walk, with the former ease of the Ancients: <sup>14</sup>

Where now that Pegasus of antient tune,  
 And Ippogrifo famed in modern rhyme?  
 O where that wooden steed, whose every leg  
 Like lightning flew, obsequious to the peg.  
 .....

<sup>12</sup>John Gay Poetry and Prose, eds. Dearing and Beckwith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), I, 208-214.

<sup>13</sup>J. Marjoribanks] Trifles in Verse by a Young Soldier (Kelso: 1784), I, 17-18; S. Boyse, Translations and Poems Written on Several Subjects (Edinburgh: 1731), p. 98.

<sup>14</sup>James Beattie, Poems on Several Occasions (Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1776), pp. 66-68.

This speech was B - t's; and, though mean in phrase  
 The nearest thing to prose, as Horace says,  
 (Satire the fourth, and forty second line)  
 'Twill intimate that I propose to dine. (ll. 9-37)

The mention of Horace is revealing for it suggests that his familiar style was seen as the appropriate means of communication between friends. A more explicit reference to this aspect of the epistolary tradition is to be found in Nisbet's "Criticism of the Chief Latin Poets: To Dr. ALEX. ADAM," where he recommends Horace's facility and his value as a moral touchstone:<sup>15</sup>

With careless ease the Muse of Horace strays,  
 Unlook'd for moral decks his am'rous lays:  
 .....  
 Some vice in vogue, with laughing ire displays  
 Or seeks to wear from Critic rules the bays. (ll.31-38)

Of the eighteenth-century Scots poets, the man who achieves most success in this type of verse is William Hamilton of Bangour. He published a variety of epistolary verse in his collection of poems.<sup>16</sup> "To a Young Lady" (pp.1-3) is an admonitory piece, replete with the wisdom of experience expressed in gnomic truths. "To the Countess of Eglintoun ... " (pp. 23-28) discourses at length on the theme of human happiness. However, Hamilton also includes translations from Horace's odes and epistles, and it is one of these translations which represents his finest achievement. His "Horace Book I Epistle XVIII Imitated" (pp. 153-68) is a long poem, but the sombre, final lines below give some indication of the balanced, measured judgement at work throughout. They also correct the belief

<sup>15</sup>W. Nisbet, Poems: Chiefly Composed from Recent Events (Edinburgh: 1780), pp. 120-23.

<sup>16</sup>W. Hamilton, Poems on Several Occasions (Edinburgh: W. Gordon, 1760).



that Burns inherited a native tradition which can be dismissed as frivolous:

Let Fortune kind, the Just Enough provide,  
 Nor dubious float on Hope's uncertain tide;  
 Add thoughts compos'd, affections ever even -  
 Thus far suffices to have asked of heaven,  
 Who in the dispensations of a day,  
 Grants life, grants death; now gives, now takes away:  
 To scaffolds oft the ribbon'd spoiler brings;  
 Takes power from statesmen, and their thrones from kings;  
 From the unthankful heart the bliss decreed -  
 But leaves the man of worth still bless'd indeed:  
 Be life heaven's gift, be mine the care to find  
 Still equal to itself the balanc'd mind  
 Fame, beauty, wealth forgot, each human toy,  
 With thoughtful quiet pleas'd, and virtuous joy;  
 In these, and these alone, supremely blest,  
 When fools and madmen scramble for the rest.

The persistent appeal of the verse-epistle to Scots in the eighteenth century may be gauged from the number of poets who chose to write in this form. Alexander Pennecuik, James Wilson, Robert Smith, William Meston, and Alexander Nicol all included epistles in their published work. Pennecuik will write an epistle on almost any pretext. His "Letter to Alexander Baillie ... who had borrowed a Shearing Hay Spade" reminds us irresistibly of the occasional verse which Burns was to write to friends as proof of his poetic ability in versifying mundane subjects.<sup>17</sup> Wilson's epistolary verse ranges from the cursory debt-paying of "Claudero to Mr. William Peter, Taylor" to the merciless, sustained drubbing of "Claudero to Whitefield".<sup>18</sup> The attack in the latter epistle resembles a Scottish "flyting", but for the mediaeval poem's sustained, inventive insult and virtuosity of

<sup>17</sup>A. Pennecuik, A Collection of Curious Scots Poems (Edinburgh: 1762), pp. 49-50.

<sup>18</sup>[Claudero [James Wilson], Miscellanies in Prose and Verse on Several Occasions (Edinburgh: 1771), pp. 82-83 and pp. 13-14.

expression we must turn to Robert Smith. His epistolary exchanges with Jasper Craig have a violence and verve that acknowledges no source other than the mediaeval tradition.<sup>19</sup> Smith's justification for his attack on Craig's poetry is that "... fest'ring Wounds need nipping Salves", but each gives too obvious signs of enjoying the tussle for us to accept this at face value. Nicol is a more decorous, not to say dull, soul, and is more important for his contribution to the development of "Standart Habby". His epistle "To one who delighted to read Poetry" is a worthy, if unsuccessful, attempt to treat in epistolary verse a subject - the value of poetry - which Burns was later to deal with so successfully.<sup>20</sup> A more important precursor of Burns is William Meston, whose talent for irony is clearly displayed in "A Letter from a Gentleman to his Brother, concerning State-Oaths."<sup>21</sup> This ironic satire succeeds because Meston has sketched the self-deluding reasoning of the hypocrite by voice alone. He blusters, boasts, scorns, and cringes, only to reveal his total lack of principle:

I'll stretch my conscience to receive all Oaths,  
 And change religion as I do my cloaths.  
 In fine, before I forfeit my estate,  
 I'll swear Allegiance to great Mahomet. (ll. 76-79)

Another measure of the epistle's variety and persistence is its continued appearance in a journal like the Scots Magazine. An examination of issues of the periodical, at intervals of a decade, from 1740 to 1780, reveals the satirical "Epistle from the Hon. Charles

<sup>19</sup>R. Smith, Poems of Controversy Betwixt Episcopacy and Presbytery (n.p., 1714), pp. 11-58.

<sup>20</sup>A. Nicol, The Rural Muse (Edinburgh: 1753), pp. 26-28.

<sup>21</sup>W. Meston, The Poetical Works of the Ingenious and Learned William Meston, 6th ed. (Edinburgh: F. Robertson, 1767), pp. 185-87.

Fox ... ", a "Heroic Epistle from Sergeant Bradshaw ... ", "A familiar epistle from the shades below ... ", "An epistle from a Curate of a polite village near London ... ", "An Epistle to Mr. Pope", and several other types of epistolary verse.<sup>22</sup>

Distinctively Scots epistles, owing little in style in content to English models, are comparatively rare. (I exclude, of course, epistles in "Standart Habby" which I shall examine shortly.) "To a Gentleman, upon saying he had in vain attempted to answer a few lines sent him in Scots verse, ... ", from the Scots Magazine, boasts, in the vernacular, of the fidelity of the Scots muse, but it is loud and insistent strident.<sup>23</sup> Robertson of Struan's Jacobite sympathies, though expressed in English vocabulary, hark back to the crude blows and buffets of the Scottish Pasquils; its laboured but effective expression in "To One who wrote some scurrilous Verses upon the Prince" has a rough, untamed (one is tempted to say, uncontaminated) violence:<sup>24</sup>

To plague us with thy undigested Rhimes,  
False, ev'n beyond the Falshood of the Times,  
Thou might'st as well have gobbled up a Dose,  
Of Garlick, and have belch'd it at our Nose.  
Ev'n should the Subject of thy Lines permit  
Some Sallies from th' Exorbitance of Wit,  
Sure thou hadst no Pretence, so vile a Creature!  
Who pump'st for Pleasure contrary to Nature;  
And nought from such Pollution can proceed,  
But shapeless Monsters of a booby Breed. (ll. 1-10)

22

Scots Magazine, Feb. 1780, pp. 91-92; June 1780, pp. 319-20; March 1760, p. 149; Feb. 1750, p. 84; and Apr. 1740, pp. 182-83.

23

Ibid., March 1750, pp. 182-83.

24

Alex. Robertson, The History and Martial Achievements of the Robertson's of Strowan (Edinburgh: [1775 ?]), Pt.2, 88.

Alexander Nicol participated in an epistolary exchange, in the "Cherrie and the Slae" stanza, with Robert Smith, but neither writes memorable poetry.<sup>25</sup> Nicol's first epistle is dull and repetitive, and he repeats its finger-wagging morality in his "Epistle ... to a young Merchant in Perth" (pp. 276-77). Burns was to bring a much more mature and less oppressive spirit to this type of epistle in his "Epistle to a Young Friend" (K105). Smith's reply is equally dismal, but Nicol's answer, which closes the exchange, tackles the question of Man's inherent folly. Although several stanzas are given over to rhetorical posturing, the attempt to treat such subjects in a native metre is significant. It is interesting to note that Burns's early extended piece of philosophical speculation is also to be found in this same metre in the "Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet." (K51).

This review of the epistolary poetry written and published in the eighteenth century, in metres other than "Standart Habby", has two important consequences for the study of Burns's verse-epistles. Firstly, by providing a wider context in which to examine his epistolary poetry, it corrects the mistaken notion that Burns's verse in non - "Standart Habby" forms was merely an aberration. As this survey has shown, he inherited a much wider range of epistolary poetry than that written in "Standart Habby" alone, and in writing epistles like that to Tytler of Woodhouselee (K152) or that to Hugh Parker (K222), he was making use of those parts of this inheritance which he found poetically valuable. Secondly, the variety of this tradition and the ideas and themes which it introduced (and which could not easily have been accommodated or transmitted in the vernacular epistolary tradition) were significant for Burns's development. There, he met with

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Nicol, Poems on Several Subjects both Comical and Serious (Edinburgh: 1766), pp. 119-28.

novel moral stances and structures of feeling, from the Horatian ethos of Ramsay and Hamilton of Bangour to the just anger of Pope. The epistles surveyed above were sufficiently flexible to accommodate narrative, self-dramatization, explanation, confession, and other voices within a single poetic "kind". This body of epistolary verse was further important in that its range furnished models which Burns could follow in particular social situations, when the vernacular would have been inappropriate. Moreover, the catch-all nature of the epistle, as demonstrated above, was an added recommendation to a young poet, impatient of rules and of quicksilver spirit.

Nevertheless, the native verse tradition was that in which Burns wrote his greatest epistolary poetry, and from the eighteenth century onwards, that tradition is inextricably linked with the verse-form known as "Standart Habby". When Burns came to write, the vernacular verse-epistle was the form in which to render speech, was the form which could best capture the zigzag speed of thought, and was the form which combined familiarity and satire, personal allusion and moral statement. It will be the purpose of the remainder of this chapter to discover why this should be so.

The "Standart Habby" verse form originates in mediæval Latin and French poetry, but its first appearance in Scottish literature is elusive. A proto - "Standart Habby" stanza occurs twice in the Makculloch MS., in an early sixteenth century hand.<sup>26</sup> However, the classic stanza first appears in Ane Satyre of the Three Estaitis at ll. 483-88 of the 1602 text.<sup>27</sup> Lindsay, however,

<sup>26</sup>Pieces from the Makculloch and the Gray MSS, ed. G. Stevenson, Scottish Text Society, O.S., 65 (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1918), pp.33-34 and pp. 35-36.

<sup>27</sup>The Works of Sir David Lindsay, ed. D. Hamer, Scottish Text Society, 3rd. ser., 2 (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1931), p.69.

was a careless metrist, and since he has no other instance of this metre, its appearance is probably fortuitous. "Standart Habby" first occurs as a clear metrical choice on the part of the poet in the work commonly called The Gude and Godlie Ballatis.<sup>28</sup> "Rycht sorelie musing in my minde" is a religious piece, in four stanzas, of native composition (unlike the majority of verses in parts I and II of this compilation which are largely translations, some more free than others, of German and Latin originals). How this stanza form reached Scotland is something of a mystery, but a possible route may have been transmission from England via the folk-play, examples of which are recorded for Aberdeen, and other Scottish towns.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, it is used in the surviving texts of four of the York Plays and in the Towneley Mysteries, which probably belong to the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

The next poet to use the form sheds little further light on the matter. Alexander Scott was heavily influenced by French and English examples, and was at home in a wide variety of metres. It is, therefore, questionable, if his use of "Standard Habby" was prompted by

<sup>28</sup> A Compendious Book of Godly and Spiritual Songs . . ., ed. A.F. Mitchell, Scottish Text Society, O.S. No. 39 (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1897), pp. 61-62.

<sup>29</sup> Anna J. Mill, Mediaeval Plays in Scotland, St. Andrews University Publications, No. 24 (Edinburgh: Wm. Blackwood, 1927), pp. 60ff.

<sup>30</sup> York Plays . . ., ed. Lucy T. Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1885). The plays are The Armourers (No. 6), The Smythis (No. 22), The Carpenteres (No. 38), and The Escreveneres. The Towneley Plays are Nos. 14, 26, 27 and 32 in The Towneley Plays, ed. G. England and A.W. Pollard, Early English Text Society, extra ser. No. 71 (London: Kegan Paul, 1897).

established Scottish practice, but his handling of the form in three poems illuminates its peculiar characteristics. "On Paciens in Lufe" reveals an inwardness with the mannered "amour courtois" conventions, and deals competently with a sentiment which was commonplace.<sup>31</sup> "A Complaint aganis Cupeid" is livelier.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, stanza two has a spirited movement lacking in the previous poem. This piece exhibits certain notable features - the breaking-up of the long lines by single words expressing closely-allied ideas, alliterative invective, and a conscious manipulation of the stanza-form, especially in the use of the bob-and-wheel:

Quhat is thy manret bot mischief,  
 Sturt, angir, grunching, yre, and greif,  
 Evill Lyfe, and langour but releif  
   Off wounde wan,  
 Displesour, pane, and he repreif  
   Off God and man.   (11. 13-18)

Scott's "It cumis ou Luvaris to be laill" has, as bob and wheel, a double refrain, "Ressoun/Tressoun", which is very effective.<sup>33</sup> The poem is intended as a piece of good advice for would-be "Luvaris", outlining what is permissible. The contrast between "Ressoun" and "Tressoun" is admirably matched by the form of the verse:

Be secret, trew, and plane all wey;  
 Defend air fame baith nyt and day;  
 In prevy place suppoiss ye play -  
   Ressoun  
 Bot be e ane clattrer, harmisay! -  
   Tressoun.   (11. 37-42)

Here, the social graces and tantalizing delights of ll. 37-39 receive a resounding smack of approval in the short "Ressoun", and the

<sup>31</sup>The Poems of Alexander Scott, ed. J. Cranstoun, Scottish Text Society, O.S. No. 36 (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1896), pp. 53-54.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 83-84

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 36-37

dastardly conduct of l. 41 is condemned in the harsh "Tressoun",

The Bannatyne MS., from which these poems are taken, also contains three other secular works in this stanza - "My Hairt, repoiss the and the rest", "Pansing of Lufe quhat Lyf it leidis" and "In somer quhen Flouris will smell".<sup>34</sup> The last-mentioned of these is a very interesting example of the form. It tells, in frank first-person narrative, of the meeting between a "weilfard may" and the narrator, and their love-making in the open air. The tone is at once joyous and nostalgic, capturing the recollected passion of the man and the surprising forwardness of the woman in verse that abounds in the characteristics already noted, yet is, at the same time, strikingly original. There are many examples of alliteration, and the repetition of synonymous words and phrases, as in "As I fure our fair feildis and fell". The poet uses to the full the opportunities presented by the stanza form. In the brazen offer of the breathless short line, "Cum tak it now", the monosyllables increase the urgency of the appeal.

However, what is unique about this poem is the way in which the poet incorporates dialogue and handles it with a fair degree of success:

My hatt is ȝouris of proper dett  
 And on my heid scho cowth it sett  
 Than in my armes I cowth hir plett  
                   And scho to thraw  
 Allace q scho ȝe gar me swett  
 ȝe wirk so slaw (ll. 31-36)

Here, the frustration of the woman is given vivid expression in the short final line, and her eagerness is emphasized by the way in which the verse-form contrasts the tossing movement of "thraw" and

<sup>34</sup> The Bannatyne Manuscript, ed. W. Tod Ritchie, Scottish Text Society, 2nd ser. Nos. 22, 23, 26, and 3rd ser. No. 5, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1928-34). See, respectively, III, 325-26; IV, 96-97; and III, 26-27.



the damning "slaw". The poem is a remarkable document. Its earthiness, its celebration of sex as a pleasure, its recognition of the sexual desire in women makes it the spiritual precursor of one aspect of Burns. The skill exhibited here suggests that there existed, circa 1568, some tradition of composition in this metre. We should not, therefore, be surprised by the appearance, some seventy years later, of a poem in this form dealing with a non-religious, unsophisticated, popular subject.

"My Hairt, repoiss the and the rest" is unremarkable.

"Pansing of Lufe quhat Lyf it leidis" deals with the trials of love in a "Standart Habby" stanza with a monosyllabic refrain, "Vane". It fluctuates between the particular and the general, using personal experience as the base from which to dispense admonition and cautionary advice. The existence of such verses as these demonstrates that a certain facility of composition in this form had been attained by the end of the sixteenth century in Scotland. They reveal a willingness to deal with secular topics, far removed from the religious poetry of the earliest examples - topics which can either be coarse, as in "It cumis ow luvaris ...", or refined, as in "On Paciens in Lufe".

The last sixteenth-century example of "Standart Habby" is a satirical poem, unsigned, but bearing all the hall-marks of Robert Sempill, the Protestant propagandist.<sup>35</sup> It is addressed to "My Lordis" and deals with the influence over them of Sir John Maitland (Secretary Maitland), Laird of Lethington. It is written for the most part in true "Standart Habby", with some small variations in line length. The poet exploits the formal possibilities of the verse-

<sup>35</sup> Satirical Poems of the Time of the Reformation, ed. J. Cranstoun, Scottish Text Society, O.S. No.20 (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1890), pp. 128-31.

form. In stanza two, for example, he uses the fourth line to define baldly what has been hinted in the preceding three lines, and then employs the fifth and sixth as one line to warn of the inevitable dangers they will suffer as a result of their negligence:

Althocht the warldlie wise be cruikit,  
This commoun weill he hes miscuikit,  
Our Lordis ar blinde and dois overlukit:  
                  He gydis thame as he list  
Tak thay not tent he will not huik it  
                  To gyde thame in the mist.                   (11. 7-12)

We also find those common characteristics, such as alliteration in "pluke and pow", and the linking of nominal phrases by "and", as in "And wantit baith ressoun and ryme". Moreover, there is suggestive evidence that the poem is an example of a popular form. The language is plain and pithy, and several of the aphoristic lines have the ring of popular speech - "The cruikit leidis the blinde", "The murderours may sing", and "He susseis not thre strais". There is, too a proverbial note in "Thay say he can baith quhissil and cloik,/And his mouth full of meill"(11. 83-84). This demonstrates that the form was not used exclusively for sophisticated topics, but could be employed for satirical verse designed for a popular audience. Although a partisan poem which makes no attempt to understand any other point of view, it is free from the coarse virulence which is all too common in other poems by this propagandist. It has, rather, the ring of a sombre appear<sup>ly</sup> for vigilance, a lament for the condition of the country.

So far, we have seen that there existed, before Sempill of Beltrees' poem, several interesting examples of "Standart Habby", with certain distinctive characteristics, such as frequency of alliteration, a fondness for the pithy phrase, union of similar concepts by "and", adjectival and nominal variation, and the use of the short fourth line as a capping climax or a reversal in meaning. However,

the above poems had little direct influence on the eighteenth-century development of the form. Then, poets who wrote in this metre acknowledged as the source for their verse one poem - "The Life and Deaeh [sic] of the Piper of Kilbarchan or, the Epitaph of Habbie Simson" by Robert Sempill of Beltrees.<sup>36</sup> This is not the place to analyze this seminal work in depth, but I wish to reject the naive classification of it as a mock-elegy and substitute a reading which views it as commemorative and nostalgic - a New Orleans funeral procession in verse. Technically, the poem is most important.

It is essentially static, a catalogue. There is no sense of narrative flow, no transition between the stanzas. Each six-line unit is self-contained. Those effects which the poet wishes to create are managed within these six lines. There is no overall structure. Within the stanzas, however, the effects are successfully handled. Each stanza is so constructed as to heighten the nostalgic atmosphere of the poem. The first four lines describe the past and the remaining two contrast that image with the present, to its detriment:

" At Clark-phys when he wont to come,  
 His Pipe play'd trinly to the Drum;  
 Like Bikes of Bees he gart it Bum,  
                                     And tun 'd his Reed.  
 Now all our Pipers may sing dumb,  
                                     sen Habbie's dead.                 (11. 31-36)

The grammatical and rhythmical full-stop at the end of l.34 corresponds exactly with the full-stop in terms of time and sense; the juxtaposition of past and present is abrupt and incessant. Moreover, by insisting on "dead" in the final line of each stanza, the

<sup>36</sup> All quotations are taken from the version published in A Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems, comp. J. Watson, I (Edinburgh: J. Watson, 1706), 32-35. Its inclusion in this collection made it readily available to the eighteenth century.

contrast between then and now is made very definitely each time. We are brought up short with the hard fact of Habbie's death in each "snapshot". Thus, the sense of loss is stressed by the rhyme between "dead", which always occurs in those two lines dealing with the present, and the corresponding rhyme of the contrasting section celebrating the past. Similarly, the rhetorical question is often used to recall some memorable event and to muse on what will now prevail, after Habbie's death.

In a "Standart Habby" stanza, the management of lines four and six is crucial since this intrusion of a short line after three longer lines and its rhyming with a capping short phrase in line six constitutes its essential difference from other verse-forms. By choosing to repeat "dead" in each final line, Sempill certainly obtains the hammer-blow effect of finality and the shock of change, but he seriously restricts his choice of rhymes. Lines like "Withouten dread" and "For pith and speed" are in the nature of "tags", inserted as a rhyming necessity. It is interesting to note that these lines, and others ("But guile or greed", for example) have a traditional ring, as if they had been current in this form in speech for many years, and were thus readily available to a poet seeking to fill an awkward space.

In other stanzas, the fourth line does have an important part to play. In stanza one, it arrests the flow of the first three lines with a tone of hopeless resignation, and in stanzas two, seven and ten it allows Sempill to extend the third line into what reads as one long line, thus giving it added emphasis. In stanzas four and five, it carries the comparison; in six, nine, and eleven it is used to recapitulate the idea or action of line three, and in thirteen, it is a phrase in apposition. Similarly, the short line six varies in its role. In stanza thirteen, it carries the sense

as if it were part of one long line, whereas in stanza eight, its brutal intrusion brings us back to harsh reality. In this way, Sempill exploits many of the possibilities which the form offers, varying the structure of certain stanzas without appearing to do so. However, he falls into the trap of unwarranted inversion simply to obtain the rhyme which this greedy form demands, as in "On bagpipes (now) no Body blows", where the stress inevitably falls on "bagpipes" and produces a rather lame line, since what is being stressed is the fact that "no Body blows" any longer.

His handling of the verse-form is, in the main, successful, and one might mention other distinguishing characteristics which link this poem with those early examples of the form noted above and with later eighteenth-century poets who modelled their practice on Sempill's achievement. Fondness for alliteration, (a survival of mediaeval poetic practice), the frequent appearance of lines without verbs, the accumulation of nominal and adjectival detail are to become very noticeable in the work of Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns.

There are three other examples of the form in Watson's compilation. The "Epitaph on Sanny Briggs ...", assigned, without good reason, to Sempill, is closely modelled on the above poem, but nowhere matches it in conception or execution.<sup>37</sup> The butler is a mere type, the knockabout comic servant, who dupes his unwitting master. His actions are described with goliardic, rumbustious comedy, but the handling of the verse-form is much clumsier than in Sempill's poem. At times, the verse reads as mere doggerel. The opening stanza, for example, reveals an inability to use the advantages offered by the form, and the poet is much more restricted by the necessity of finding rhymes for "dead", using "head" three times

<sup>37</sup>Watson, op. cit., I, 36-38.

and "need" twice within eleven stanzas. He is also guilty of using 'tags which add little to the meaning but simply fill out the line, and throughout he betrays a paucity of invention. Technically, this poem is clumsy and careless to a degree which suggests an unconcerned or unpractised hand. Its low and frivolous subject-matter also represents an early stage in the trivialization of the form.

"William Lithgow, Writer in Edinburgh, his Epitaph" is modelled on Sempill's poem, but its anti-authority stance, its popular nature, and its concentration on the low comedy of drunkenness makes it close cousin to "Sanny Briggs".<sup>38</sup> In this epitaph the actions and qualities commemorated are those shared by all "Good-fellows" who enjoy drinking deep, wenching, and who despise their wives. The death of Lithgow is an occasion for thinly-disguised celebration of the popular pleasures to be had in the low-life of eighteenth-century Edinburgh. The individual stanza is the unit by which the poet measures his progress, and a series of descriptions of action and character succeed one another with monotonous regularity. The effect is crude. It is as if a painter were to attempt to capture the likeness of a sitter by taking a series of photographs of the person in different poses and then pasting them on to a canvas. The artist is reduced to a man with a camera. In this poem, long lines and short lines click into place like the shutter of a camera, and after each "click" we are presented with one frozen pose after another, but we never meet the whole man. It is a slick, mechanical process and, given some familiarity with the form, almost anyone could (and, unfortunately, almost everyone would) do it. There is nothing in this poem to suggest new lines of development, formally or thematically. The poem has a very high percentage of end-stopped lines and lines of an

<sup>38</sup> Watson, II, 67-70.

exactly similar structure:

At length his Wife fell to her Tricks,  
 She haunted Limmers and great Licks,  
 She drank with them and pried their  
     But any Dread,  
 He valued her as rotten Sticks  
     Which was his Dead.      (11. 67-72)

This is the danger of a poet working carelessly with a type of poetry, epitaph, which invites a cataloguing, listing style. The effect soon becomes boring and repetitive.

"The Last Dying Words of Bonny Heck ....." is the first animal monologue in which "Standart Habby" is used to convey the impression of living speech.<sup>39</sup> The poem combines several traditional elements. It draws on the idea of the gallows-confession, a common topic in chapbook literature. "Bonny Heck" is recognizably one of that band of genial rogues who typify sly cunning and deceit yet, because of their congenial vitality, retain their hold on our affections. Self-exposure, an ever-popular source of comedy, also plays a large part in the success of the poem. It is, however, most interesting in respect of its attempted technical innovations.

By writing a confession and not an epitaph, the poet has created the opportunity for new developments in the uses to which "Standart Habby" may be put. To be successful, "The Last Dying Words ... " must approximate the speaking voice and must attempt the creation of character from the inside, through the medium of a distinctive voice. The poet's attempt, which is truly successful only in stanza ten, is crucial for the developments which follow, first by Ramsay, and then by Ferguson and Burns. By rejecting a slavish dependence on the "dead" rhyme and introducing others, this poet was already chafing at bonds which future writers were to break trium-

<sup>39</sup> Watson, I, 68-70.

phantly. His use of feminine rhyme for comic effect in lines 61-66 is truly novel, but the unit of narrative remains the single stanza; the poem is static and quite without any sense of forward movement. Despite its deficiencies, "Bonny Heck" had much to offer Ramsay and others as a model for comic, familiar verse. Ramsay chose the form for that most "spoken" and intimate of poems, the verse-epistle. He appreciated that "Standart Habby", as used here, was an excellent medium in which to convey the sense of vivid, racy speech:

Now Honesty was ay my Drift,  
 An innocent and harmless Shift,  
 A Kaill-pot-lid gently to lift,  
                                 or Amry-Sneck.  
 Shame fa the Chafts, dare call that Thift,  
                                 quo' bonny Heck. (ll. 55-60)

As the century progresses, the links between the spoken word and the "Standart Habby" form will become closer until, in Burns, they are inseparable.

These poems, all easily available to Ramsay, have in common certain values which he was to embody in his verse in this form. They share the sense of appeal to a restricted audience, an "in-group" who will recognize various arcane allusions and shared situations. With the exception of "Habbie Simson", which records the loss of a man to an entire community, the poems are masculine in their vaunting attitude to women, and their insistence on boon companionship. All four poems are retrospective and celebrative, looking backwards to memories shared in a happier and better time, in contrast to the dull, sad world of the present. This element of contrast between past and present becomes, in Burns, a contrast between the actual and the possible. He does not look back with regret, but forward, with hope and determination. There is, finally, a concentration on festive events of one sort or another, occasions on which men (and in Habbie Simson's case, an entire society) relaxed together and enjoyed each



other's company.

With Allan Ramsay, the development of "Standart Habby" as a peculiarly Scottish verse-form with unique features truly began. His verse-correspondence with Hamilton of Gilbertfield ensured its acceptance as an effective vehicle for self-dramatization and communication, and the superiority of his elegies in this metre over any that had appeared before meant that this was to become its prime poetic use in the ensuing years of the century. In his poems in "Standart Habby" can be seen the germ of opportunities for the form to become the means of rendering the ebb and flow of spontaneous thought, and the darting, lively movement of living speech. The popularity of his verses resulted in the inevitable linking of a set of values and moral tone with the metre - a limitation which was never entirely overcome by later poets, but which has been unfairly identified as the hallmark of vernacular verse in this form. Elegies and epistles were not the only types of verse which Ramsay attempted in "Standart Habby"; he tried to broaden its scope, but not always successfully. That was to be the work of Fergusson later in the century.

The first series of poems for which Ramsay adopted "Standart Habby" as the, by now, conventional verse-form was his group of elegies and death-bed speeches.<sup>40</sup> Each of these four poems reveals a much more competent and talented poet than any hitherto encountered. For the first time, there is a distinct structuring of the entire poem. The single stanza is no longer the unit of composition; instead, Ramsay introduces a flowing, narrative element. The tale told

<sup>40</sup> The four poems are: "Elegy on Maggy Johnston ... " (Ramsay STS I, 10-13); "Elegy on John Cowper ..." (Ramsay STS I, 14-17); "Elegy on Lucky Wood ..." (Ramsay STS I, 18-21); and "Lucky Spence's Last Advice" (Ramsay STS I, 22-26).

against himself in ll. 55-72 of the "Elegy on Maggy Johnston" is introduced to perform several functions. It climaxes and illustrates affectionately the generalized recollections of friendly drinking; it testifies to the power of Maggie's ale, and heightens the sense of loss - alas!, the secret of her brew died with her. The structuring extends to comparisons between stanzas, as in the wild energy of ll. 31-36 and the contrasting slow rhythms of ll. 37-42.

The witty and satirical "Elegy on John Cowper", like "Habbe Simson", concentrates on the man's function in society, but it makes comic capital out of this chastiser of immorality. He is cleverly presented as the complete, bureaucratic functionary, pursuing rich and poor with equal determination. However, Ramsay cannot entirely escape the syntactical consequences of describing someone in terms of their occupation, and the elegy suffers from a preponderance of lines of identical structure.

"Lucky Wood" is a near relative of "Maggy Johnston", but here Ramsay concentrates on physical description of the woman and her habits, instead of using the recollection of her death as a signal for the celebration of shared experience. The compression of detail in ll. 25-28, and the description of food in ll. 37-48 create an image of ordered sufficiency which accords well with the character assigned to her in ll. 19-24, yet the verse never really comes alive. "Lucky Spence's last Advice", however, is a triumphantly comic poem. Here Ramsay has given us a "madame" who might have been the offspring of a union between Moll Flanders and Fagin. Amoral, protective of her "girls", gifted in deceit and all the wiles of her trade, Lucky Spence, in her dying speech, gives a fine comic parody of the code by which the "unco' guid" live:

O black Ey'd Bess and mim Mou'd Meg,  
 O'er good to work or yet to beg;  
 Lay Sunkets up for a sair Leg,  
                     For whan ye fail  
 Ye'r Face will not be worth a Feg,  
                     Nor yet ye'r Tail.           (11. 13-18)

Ramsay creates the natural speech of this grasping, cunning bawd, and the very movement of the verse reveals her character. The spitting alliteration of "a Fool that's fow" conveys a biting contempt for her "customers". In line 20, Ramsay re-arranges the syntax to push "Maiden" to its prominent place, thus suggesting the necessary duplicity of the whore, presenting flawed goods as the perfect article. "Seem nice", continues Lucky Spence, but betrays the rapacity of her profession in the swift, snapping climax of "but stick to him like Glew". By altering the traditional division of the third stanza of four and two to three and three, Ramsay can use the pause before line 22, "And whan set down", to hint a great deal without being specific, and can also make the capture of the "customer/victim" more dramatic and final.

The poem is crammed with the imperatives of the work ethic, but Lucky, the eternal saleswoman, remains suggestively coy about what might be termed the "bare facts" of her existence:

And gin he likes to light his Match  
                                     at your Spunk-box,  
 Ne'er stand to let the fumbling Wretch  
                                     E'en take the Pox.           (11. 27-30)

The affirmation of life in the opening stanza and her dying wish for drunken oblivion are convincing details in an honest, crude, convincing picture of the whore. Ramsay has got under Lucky Spence's skin, and creates a character from within by means of a familiar and natural voice. There are lapses of taste, but the poem is an excellent example of what he could achieve when he united his talent for the vernacular to a suitable verse-form.

Ramsay wrote two other death-bed speeches in "Standart Habby" - the "Last Speech of Caleb Bailey" (Ramsay STS III, 333-34) and "The Last Speech of a Wretched Miser" (Ramsay STS II, 62-68). This last matches and often surpasses Lucky Spence's piece. Ramsay demonstrates the same interest in and sympathetic identification with an abnormal psyche, to the point where he can speak as a miser, appreciating his hopes and fears, as in ll. 157-62 where the language of Love is corrupted by its use in this context. He exposes his inner being by revealing the contempt of the fanatic for those who are so foolish not to share his obsession:

Some loo the Courts, some loo the Kirks  
 Some loo to keep their Skins frae Lirks,  
 Some loo to woo beneath the Birks  
   Their Lemans bony;  
 For me, I took them a' for Stirks  
   That loo'd na Money.           (11. 85-90)

The movement of the verse in this stanza is so well-handled that it would seem to have been the direct source for Burns's lines 73-78 in his epistle to M'Math (K68). In addition, the unwitting self-exposure of a crippled spirit in ll. 67-72 and ll. 103-08 of Ramsay's poem is an early indication of the possibilities of language for self-condemnation, a lesson which Burns had learned well by the time of writing "Holy Willie's Prayer" (K53). The suitability of "Standart Habby" for rendering the complexities of thought and speech is most apparent in this monologue:

What Reason can I shaw, quo' ye,  
 To save and starve, to cheat and lie,  
 To live a Beggar, and to die  
   Sae rich in Coin?           (11. 55-58)

Here, the balance of "save and starve", "cheat and lie" prepares us for a phrase in the second half of l. 57 which will match the structure of "To live a Beggar". But, Ramsay runs the line on into the short l. 58 with its dissonant rhyme, to obtain a complex and telling effect.

Not only is the reader taken aback, but the upsetting of the pattern of indictment by the Miser's enemies, whose thoughts he is voicing, suggests both their discomfiture on realizing his wealth and his paradoxical nature, who can live in squalor and die in wealth. After this, the suitability of "Standart Habby" for capturing the rhythms and tones of speech is obvious. In his verse-epistles, Ramsay seizes the opportunity and begins, in effect, the tradition of the vernacular verse-epistle.

The correspondence between Hamilton of Gilbertfield and Ramsay (Ramsay STS I, 115-34) is so successful because, as their exchange reveals, their personalities and interests are very similar.<sup>41</sup> They hold the world of the Easy Club, that atmosphere of convivial, bickering, jovial companionship, in common. They are united against carping critics, but appreciative of the friendly jibes of boon companions. This identity of aim lends the verse a close-knit, inward looking confidence. The correspondence is proof of firm friendship which no mere mortal could shatter. Compliments flow freely:

Tho' Ben and Dryden of Renown  
Were yet alive in London Town  
Like Kings contending for a Crown  
                  'Twad be a Pingle,  
Whilk o' you three wad gar Words sound  
                  And best to gingle.           (Ep. I, 11.19-24)

The conception of poetry which this stanza embodies is informative. Poetry is a means of cementing the social bond, a species of rivalry in which friends participate in a spirit of companionable competition. In keeping with the competitive nature of the exchange, each boosts the other's morale:

<sup>41</sup> Hamilton begins the correspondence, and each writes three verse-epistles in "Standart Habby". In my text, I refer to Hamilton's epistles as Ep. I, II, or III; Ramsay's, as Ans. I, II, or III.

Ye'll quat your Quill! That were ill-willy  
 Ye's sing some mair yet, nill ye will ye,  
 O'er meikle Haining wad but spill yet,  
                         And gar ye sour,  
 Then up and war them a' yet, Willy,  
                         'Tis in your Power. (Ans.I, 11.37-42)

Although they may compete with each other, they unite to present a common front to a harsh and misunderstanding world:

Let Coxcomb Critics get a Tether  
 To ty up a' their lang loose Lether;  
 .....  
 I'm sure thou needs set little by  
                         To bide their Bellums. (Ep. II, 11.79-90)

and

Set out the burnt Side of your Shin  
 For Pride in Poets is nae Sin,  
 .....  
 Probatum est, exemplum Horace,  
                         Was a bauld Bragger. (Ans. II, 11.49-60)

The element of contrast, noted earlier, the expression of which is particularly suited to this unique stanza, here takes the form of social antagonism. Ramsay and Hamilton are, as poets, irreconcilably different from the mass of unappreciative and hostile humanity. This is important for it foreshadows similar ideas in Burns's epistolary verse and also because, I would suggest, Ramsay's decision to publish this verse-correspondence demonstrates his conviction that poetry was important and necessary in society. Like Defoe, Ramsay believed that poetry should and could influence events, as his publication of a series of poems on the contemporary phenomenon of the South-Sea Bubble shows. Publication of this correspondence lifts it out of the realm of mere friendly exchange and transforms it into a social and cultural act of wider significance.

The standards by which the two men will consent to be judged are standards which they have agreed among themselves; to harp and carp is to declare oneself an enemy. Yet, the overall tone

of the exchange is not combative. Instead, each poet specifically rejects faction and argument in favour of the true companionship of a few friends, and will settle for the Muse's affection, conviviality, and a moderate sufficiency. In its insistence on the need for ephemeral pleasure and its intensely masculine ethos, the exchange owes much to drinking songs and carouses:

Ne'er fash about your neist Year's State  
 Nor with Superior Powers debate,  
 Nor Cantrapes cast to ken your Fate;  
                   There's Ills anew  
 To cram our Days, which soon grow late;  
                   Let's live just now.           (Ans. III, 11.31-36)

The distinction between Malt liquor and a glass of claret "Wi Fowk that's chancy" in Epistle III, ll. 55-60 testifies to the social function and, equally, social inspiration of this sort of verse.

The familiarity of communication due between friends demands a form which will permit the unstructured, careless flow of anecdote, wishful thinking, compliment, innuendo to move without impediment and to rest together, finally, without absurdity. The "Standart Habby" metre is ideal in this respect. Each six-line stanza offers sufficient opportunity for diversity of effect within the stanza that we do not demand a continuous flow from one six-line unit to another. We are happy to accept them as self-contained structures, although they do not necessarily hinder the creation of larger units of meaning if the poet so wishes. For example, the two stanzas comprising ll. 13-24 of Answer III are illustrative of the theme that quiet contentment with a modest lot is often best, and that ambition can be dangerous. They form part of the larger argument of Answer III yet each is satisfying and effective in conveying meaning in its own right. Moreover, the permutations which can be wrought on the four long and two short lines of the "Standart Habby" stanza are very numerous. It is, therefore, ideal for rendering the irregularity and unpredictability of familiar

speech. For example, in ll. 31-36 of Answer III, as quoted above, the stanza is turned on the short line 34 and then run on to suggest the speed with which life slips away from us, only to stop dead, giving a Q.E.D. effect in the carefree line 36.

This exchange between Ramsay and Hamilton demonstrated the suitability of "Standart Habby" for this type of intimate, familiar, and unsophisticated communication between friends. Ramsay's other epistles in this form either suffer from the incongruous juxtaposition of Scots and English, as in his "Epistle to Mr. John Gay ..." (Ramsay STS II, 109-12) or from an excessive formality which restricts the natural tendency for movement, as in "A Scots Ode" (Ramsay STS II, 142-45) where the high number of run-on lines indicate that Ramsay should have used a more stately metre. He tried to extend the scope of "Standart Habby" beyond elegy, dying confession, and epistle. "Kate and Susan ..." (Ramsay STS III, 225-29) is a novel attempt to use the stanza in extended dramatic dialogue. As one would expect from a poet who could create the "Wretched Miser" and "Lucky Spence" so vividly through speech, the attempt is interesting, and although too long, convincing on the whole.

Ramsay's practice was crucial in furthering the development of "Standart Habby" as an appealing poetic form and as the most expressive medium for rendering familiar speech and fixing convincingly the spontaneous movement of the mind. He was entertaining, but not a precise craftsman. Only when his slapdash carelessness was tempered by the example of Fergusson's accurate, finely modulated work was "Standart Habby" ready for the impress of Burns's genius.

During Ramsay's lifetime and after his death, a considerable



body of verse in "Standart Habby" was being written and published.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, the poets who used the form were an unadventurous lot, content to produce elegies and epistles of the most pedestrian type and little else. Nevertheless, these poems testify to the popularity of the form in the eighteenth century. Moreover, the occasions on which some of these poets used "Standart Habby" and the ideas which they expressed there further show that it was not always used for frivolous verse-epistles of an entirely conventional type.

Alexander Nicol's epistolary verse in "Standart Habby" is pedestrian. These lines from his epistle "To the Laird of Abercairnie" are mere writing to order:<sup>43</sup>

Could my dull muse but clink the rhyme,  
Free of offences, or a crime,  
I wad nae grudge how meikle time  
                                  I took to raise  
The beauteous stanza of your fame  
                                  Or yet your praise                   (11. 13-18)

However, "An Elegy on auld Use and Wont" is refreshing.<sup>44</sup> It recalls the alternating perspective of "Habbie Simson" in its sad review of the contrast between past and present. Nicol examines the changes in society, in morality, in politics and religion in Scotland with a sorry eye, using the potential for contrast inherent in the stanza-form to good effect:

<sup>42</sup>Ramsay himself was the subject of a broadside, "A Block for Allan Ramsay's Wigs ...", in which his exchange with Hamilton is singled out for praise. The poem is reprinted in Ramsay STS IV, 304-07.

<sup>43</sup>Alex Nicol, Poems on Several Subjects (Edinburgh: 1766), p. 61. The volume contains several other poems in "Standart Habby" at pp. 59-60, 96-101, 101-02, 102-04.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., pp. 92-96.

Our peers and gentry were content  
 To bide at hame and spend their rent;  
 But now to travel they are bent,  
                                     Baith ane and a';  
 And crack their credit ere they stint,  
                                     Sin' Wont's awa.       (11. 37-42)

The poem is characteristic of much eighteenth century verse in this form. It is retrospective and laments the loss of a better age, although the decay which Nicol detects is, perhaps, somewhat exaggerated:

We had baith gou'd and silder mines,  
 And poets too that cou'd mak' lines,  
 And some as honest sound divines  
                                     As ither nations;  
 But now our land its beauty tines  
                                     Wi' unca fashions.       (11. 91-96)

Nicol's "Standart Habby" poetry remains unexceptional for he does not strike out in new directions. His epistolary exchange is platitudinous, and his other epistles dull and heavy. In elegy, only the above poem is remarkable and "Love's cure" merely demonstrates how poorly the expression of passion could be handled in this form before Burns.<sup>45</sup>

In the collection of poems of Alexander Pennecuik and others, however, are printed several fine poems in "Standart Habby."<sup>46</sup> They demonstrate the vitality of this form in the eighteenth century and hold out hope for future developments to come with Fergusson and Burns. The collection gathers together three interesting poems which are significant for the development of "Standart Habby" in that they are more extended pieces than had hitherto been attempted in this form.<sup>47</sup> Each is satirical at the Kirk's expense and topical, dealing, for example,

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-21.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Pennecuik et. al., A Collection of Scots Poems on Several Occasions (Edinburgh: J. Wood, 1769).

<sup>47</sup> "The Merry Wives of Musselburgh's Welcome to Meg Dickson", "The Presbyterian Pope", "Elegy on Robert Forbes"; Ibid., pp. 37-46, 102-10, 132-36.

with the very real and omnipresent figure of the Kirk-Treasurer's Man in a way that is bawdy and immensely funny. In the dense vernacular of these verses we can catch that familiar, quirky speech which Burns was later to capture so accurately. Here is the bewildered confusion of Meg Dickson as she attempts to explain her release from certain death on the gallows:

Cummer, I think my heart's half broke;  
This day I've been wi' fashious folk,  
  As e'er I saw;  
They brought me in a unco' lock,  
  Wae worth them a'.       (11. 116-120)

Exasperation and fear mingle, but it is the former which predominates. The insinuating tone of the professional inquisitor is well caught in "The Presbyterian Pope", as the Kirk Treasurer and "Meg" swap anecdotes like a criminal and a corrupt policeman:

K. Treas.       Na', Meg, you're e'en worth gowd, I vow,  
  We canna want the like o' you,  
  Serve me that way, and ye's no rue,  
  But mense your skin,  
  Slip in to company that's fou  
  And tempt to sin.       (11. 91-96)

Beattie's fine epistle to Alexander Ross is essentially retrospective, but, in Ross's vernacular poetry, he envisages a brighter future for Scotland.<sup>48</sup> He handles the stanza well and writes in lively, inventive Scots. The mixture of encouragement, praise and serious comment on the Scots poetic tradition makes this the single most important and interesting epistle between Ramsay and Burns. In contrast to its easy wit (which masks a serious intent), Dougal Graham's halting effort in "The Author's Address to all in general" is mere doggerel.<sup>49</sup> Robert Forbes's poor attempt at copy-writing in "A

<sup>48</sup> See The Scottish Works of Alexander Ross, ed. M. Wattie, Scottish Text Society, 3rd ser. No. 9 (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1938), pp. 5-7.

<sup>49</sup> The Collected Writings of Dougal Graham, ed. G. MacGregor (Glasgow: T.D. Morison, 1883), I, 251-54.

Shop-Bill" is little better, showing a lack of understanding for the way in which the verse-form works.<sup>50</sup> William Forbes' "The Dominie Depos'd" is an unsuccessful attempt to write a lengthy, sustained piece in "Standart Habby".<sup>51</sup> It is a mixture of roguish narrative, knockabout comedy, and anti-clerical satire. Its concentration on low-life recalls the early elegies in Watson's compilation and demonstrates the extent of Fergusson's achievement in taking this form with its unsavoury associations and transforming it into one capable of dealing with serious subjects. An entirely conventional epistle by George Boyack, an expatriate Scot, to Claudero (John Wilson) is included in the latter's published work.<sup>52</sup> He praises Claudero on his arrival in London, professes modesty, and views the inevitable conviviality with fervent expectation:

Leave factious curs to bite or snarrel  
 And choke them with seditious quarrel,  
 Whilst thou and I, my honest carl,  
   Bauld and heroic,  
 Will fight with weapons frae the barrel.  
   Yours Geordie Boick. (ll. 67-72)

Two other poems of note in this stanza are Mayne's "The Silver Gun" and Keith's "The Farmer's Ha'".<sup>53</sup> Both were published

<sup>50</sup>Robert Forbes, in A Select Collection of Scots Poems Chiefly in the Broad Buchan Dialect (Edinburgh: T. Ruddiman, 1785), 2nd pagination, pp. 11-14.

<sup>51</sup>William Forbes, *ibid.*, pp. 23-48.

<sup>52</sup>George Boyack, "Epistle to Claudero on his Arrival at London, 1765" in Miscellanies in Prose and Verse on Several Occasions, Claudero (Edinburgh: 1771), pp. 63-65.

<sup>53</sup>John Mayne, "The Silver Gun", in Edinburgh Magazine, or Literary Amusement, June 19 1780, pp. 309-10; July 5 1780, pp. 373-74; July 13 1780, p. 18. Charles Keith, "The Farmer's Ha'", in The Fortunate Shepherdess ... (Aberdeen: J. Burnett, 1796), pp. 136-47.

after Fergusson's poetry had appeared, and both rely heavily on his example. Keith's poem is closely modelled on Fergusson's "The Farmer's Ingle".<sup>54</sup> It is a long, affectionate, and occasionally sentimental description of the scene in a farmhouse when work is over for the day. Keith handles the "Standart Habby" with assurance, moving easily from description to convincing dialogue as the farmer enters from the fields:

And syne he does his orders gie,  
 And says, 'Ye'll busy need to be,  
 'The fallowing yon field, I see,  
                   'Taks unco' force:  
 'But gae awa' enow (quo' he)  
                   'And meat the horse'.       (ll. 349-54)

However, he is consciously writing a display piece and his introductions, as he sets each scene, are intrusive. Nevertheless, "The Farmer's Ha'" remains the most successful long poem in this stanza for it combines moral comment and sensitive description without sacrificing realism.

John Mayne's "The Siller Gun" celebrates the contest for the Silver Gun by the Incorporated Trades of Dumfries. Mayne's is an ambitious attempt to use "Standart Habby" as Fergusson had done, for an extended presentation of the varied scene, but his clumsiness in transition dooms him to failure:

E'en blyth to see them trigly drest,  
 Auld Epps was there amang the rest,  
 An, while wi' joy her sides she prest,  
                   Like mony mae,  
 Her approbation was exprest  
                   In words like thae:

Wow! but it gars ane's heart loup light. (ll. 61-67)

In addition to these poems, there was a considerable amount of verse in "Standart Habby" published in magazines, especially after Fergusson's death. This verse is almost wholly epistolary, although

<sup>54</sup>The Poems of Robert Fergusson, ed. M.P. McDiarmid, Scottish Text Society, 3rd ser. No. 21, vol. II (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1954), 136-40. Hence-forth, all references to this edition will be cited as Fergusson STS.

it does include poems such as "On the Return of March, Old Stile", with its vivid description of winter weather and "Winter, an Ode", describing a season which demands snug conviviality:<sup>55</sup>

Syne round the ingle closser still  
O what we've left we'll hae a gill,  
Content wi' this, auld Winter will  
                    Soon send us Spring;  
Whan double flocks will graze the hill,  
                    An' birdies sing.                     (11. 67-72)

Of the epistles, they either lament Fergusson's death and Scotland's loss, as in "Verses from the Living to the Dead".<sup>56</sup> Like other epistles in "Standart Habby", this concentrates on a very local situation, alluding to characters and events recognizable only to a restricted audience. Alternatively, they take the form of mutually encouraging correspondence between men who share a common nationalism or interest in vernacular poetry.<sup>57</sup> The most accomplished of these is an epistle by the Rev. John Skinner, a friend-to-be of Burns, in which he demonstrates a sturdy independence comparable to Ramsay's pride in poetry at the beginning of the century:<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Edinburgh Magazine, March 15 1781, p. 306; *ibid.*, Dec. 30 1779, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Weekly Magazine, or Edinburgh Amusement, July 11 1776, p. 82. Another such is the epistle "To the Publisher of the Weekly Magazine", *ibid.*, Apr. 7 1779, p.67.

<sup>57</sup> Among others, are the following: "To the Revered the Author of Tullochgorum, etc.", *ibid.*, Feb. 3 1779, pp. 135-36; "To the Publisher of the Weekly Magazine", *ibid.*, May 5 1779, p. 151; and the epistle "Addressed to Mr. W - MO - N, Master of the Grammar School of P - s", *ibid.*, Jan. 24 1780, p. 112.

<sup>58</sup> "To C. W. Portsoy", *ibid.*, Feb. 3 1779, p.136.

Indeed I wad, on nae pretence,  
 Wish to tyne sight o' reverence;  
 Sae if sick fouk be men of sense,  
                                   I ask their pardon;  
 But value not a fool's offence  
                                   A single farden.           (11. 43-48)

With Robert Fergusson, "Standart Habby" and eighteenth-century vernacular verse come of age. His importance as a precursor of Burns is threefold. Firstly, his tragic fate deeply impressed the later poet. In Edinburgh especially, Burns felt keenly Fergusson's situation. The neglect of a vernacular poet by an unsympathetic society was a phenomenon which he had cause to fear as he was always aware that his popularity was insubstantial. Burns saw in Fergusson a figure of frustrated talent and in his poem "On a Scotch Bard Gone to the West Indies" (K100) he too sees himself as the victim of an inhospitable society's lack of response:

Fareweel, my rhyme-composing billie!  
 Your native soil was right ill-willie;  
 But may ye flourish like a lily,  
                                   Now bonillie!                   (11. 55-58)

Like Fergusson, he has a considerable talent appreciated by a few, close friends. Such skill, however, is either unfashionable or endangers the dominant moral ethos of society. The expression of that talent, therefore, will be thwarted, and the poet doomed to obscurity and neglect.

Fergusson's importance for Burns's poetry is more immediately obvious and substantial. Although he wrote from within two poetic traditions, Fergusson achieved, as no Scots poet had before, an intellectual and linguistic synthesis. He took from each tradition, mingling the moral concern and precision of Augustan verse with the Scots eye for realistic detail and a tolerant awareness of the tragi-comedy of the human situation to produce the most effective and memorable poetry in eighteenth-

century Scotland before Burns. Fergusson was obviously at home in English verse and did not feel dwarfed by its overpowering reputation as the cultural standard against which all else should be measured. He can confidently adopt Philips's manner in his burlesque treatment of Edinburgh in "A Saturday's Expedition" (Fergusson STS II, 21-25). He can satirize Dr. Johnson's excesses with all the wit and ease of one who knows himself to be superior, and in his attack on those fawning Scots who bowed to the great man's reputation, he produces not merely a patriotic statement, but a superb poem in the vernacular.<sup>59</sup> In the latter, the various forms of address which Fergusson manages so well - threats, rhetorical questions, defiant statements, wordy lists, challenges - and the whirling vernacular in which he treats all this had significance as poetic and patriotic acts for Burns.

Fergusson could also combine vernacular and English vocabulary very effectively, as in the highly successful linguistic mix of ll. 49-60 of "The Daft Days" (Fergusson STS II, 32-34). That celebration of clarty comfort and small-group friendship captures the spirit of the city admirably. So, too, does "Auld Reikie, A Poem" (Fergusson STS II, 109-20). Though based on Gay's "Trivia", this cinematic and impressionistic view of Edinburgh is infused with a more tolerant awareness of humanity. Hogarthian in its imagery and technique of contrast, full of realistic, low detail and sharply-etched scenes, it is important for its single-minded concentration on the moral condition of a varied society. As Burns was to do with Mauchline, Fergusson sees universal significance in the fate and actions of members of the society he inhabits.

<sup>59</sup>See "To Dr. Samuel Johnson: Food for a new Edition of his Dictionary", and "To the Principal and Professors of the University of St. Andrews ..." in Fergusson STS II, 204-06 and 182-85.



A similar seriousness informs the "Elegy on the Death of Scots Music" (Fergusson STS II, 37-39). Fergusson has read "Habbe Simson" with insight and captures the nostalgic spirit of that poem in this expression of cultural nationalism. The appeal in the final stanza is deeply felt. Fergusson's use of tradition as a spur to contemporary artistic achievement finds its parallel in Burns's determination to see the noble traditions of Ayrshire in the fields of personal and religious freedom upheld.

Fergusson's achievement was significant for Burns in that, after him, poetry was obviously an effective medium in which to attempt many different things. His vernacular poetry was more mature, informed with a more telling intelligence and wit than the rhyming game in which earlier vernacular authors had indulged. With Fergusson, poetry was seen to be a potent force for satire, for communication, for celebration, and for cementing the social bond. With his example, Burns was aware of the full potential open to him.

However, his single most important contribution as a poet working in the vernacular tradition was his work in "Standart Habby". His contribution to its development is twofold. He broadened its scope by using it in novel poetic situations. And, by the careful precision of his language, and the intellectual agility of his poetic technique, he made it mature, supple, and capable of varied application.

He uses it conventionally for elegy and epistle, but even here he introduces new ideas. In his "Elegy on John Hogg ...", (Fergusson STS II, 191-94), he re-animates the elegaic convention by introducing in ll.49-60, as part of his characterization, the distinctive speech of the porter. Hogg's hard-headed, non-sense approach to philosophy is extended into his attitude to learning in

general:

"What recks tho' ye ken mood and tense?  
 " A hungry weyme  
 For GOWD wad wi' them baith dispense  
 At ony time. (11.81-84)

The sneer of these lines recalls Burns's similar question in his first epistle to John Lapraik (K57):

What's a' your jargon o' your Schools,  
 Your Latin names for horns an' stools; (11. 61-62)

It reveals a gulf between the two poets, one taught at university, the other largely self-educated.

In Fergusson's epistolary verse also, graphic imagery, colloquial vocabulary, and a satirical, observant wit unite to breathe new life into a convention which was far from thriving in the stale atmosphere generated by some of Ramsay's followers. In these lines from his "Answer to Mr. J. S's Epistle" (Fergusson STS II, 71-74), Fergusson mingles vernacular and English without incongruity to produce a distinctive, humorous rebuttal of flattery.

Awa', ye wylie fleetchin fallow;  
 The rose shall grow like gowan yallow,  
 Before I turn sae toom and shallow,  
 And void of fusion,  
 As a' your butter'd words to swallow  
 In vain delusion. (11. 7-12)

His cocky, confident voice comes through loud and clear in:

Heh lad! it wou'd be news indeed,  
 War I to ride to bonny Tweed,  
 Wha ne'er laid gamon o'er a steed  
 Beyont Lusterrick;  
 And auld shanks nag wou'd tire, I dread,  
 To pace to Berwick. (11. 37-42)

In this poem, the impression is of a swift, incisive mind working within a convention, but by no means slave to it. Fergusson introduces satire, personal allusion, and anecdote in sparkling succession. Each stanza contains something worth noting. For example, in his championing of Edinburgh lasses in ll. 43-48, the humility of "Cravin your pardon" following immediately on the defiant voice of



The union of gnostic wisdom, narrative precision, dry, perceptive humour and moral insight creates a tough, flexible instrument suitable both for dissecting ills or for generating laughter, for delineating the particular or stating the recognizable truth.

Fergusson's willingness to employ "Standart Habby" for such novel and innovating conceptions was matched by the facility and fluency of his practice. By bringing precision and an expressive articulation to the form, he steadied and refined it. For example, in these lines from "The King's Birth-Day in Edinburgh" (Fergusson STS II, 52-55):

Right seldom am I gi'en to bannin,  
But, by my saul, ye was a cannon,  
Cou'd hit a man, had he been stannin  
                                  in shire o' Fife,  
Sax long Scots miles ayout Clackmannan,  
                                  And tak his life.                   (11. 37-42)

he runs 1.39 into 1.40 and then apparently stops, breathless after this proud but hopelessly extravagant claim. At this point in the stanza, the reader's reaction is to laugh apologetically at Fergusson's enthusiastic excess, only to be left speechless when he finds that the poet's claims for Mons Meg are far from over, but are continued as he catches up, outrageously, the feminine rhyme in "Clackmannan!" Or again, in ll. 19-24 of "The Rising of the Session" quoted above, Fergusson uses English syntax, English tipped with Scots, and the vernacular itself in a stanza which reads, nevertheless, as a complete, controlled synthesis. In "Dumfries" (Fergusson STS II, 195-96), Fergusson has confidence enough to speak slightly of Horace and his verse:

Had Horace liv'd, that pleasant sinner,  
That loo'd gude wine to synd his dinner,  
His muse tho' douf, the de'il be in her,  
                                  She'd lous'd her tongue,  
The drink cou'd round Parnassus rin her  
                                  In plythest sang.                   (11. 25-30)

The effect is not, as sometimes happens with Ramsay, a ludicrous

over-familiarity. Instead, the vernacular's homely vocabulary and its associations allow Fergusson to fix memorably one important aspect of Horace's retirement poetry, its love of quiet peace and ease. Such skills as these make Fergusson a great poet in his own right, and the most important precursor of Burns's epistolary verse.

From its early history in sixteenth-century poetry and its renewed popularity in the work of Sempill of Beltrees and other elegists, through the innovative efforts of Ramsay and those mid-century poets who, mostly, marked time, to the startling talent of Fergusson, "Standart Habby" had, by the time of Burns, become a verse-form capable of both comic and serious poetry. Its numerous permutations of rhythmical effect and natural, internal divisions meant that the stanza was ideally suited to express conflicting ideas, and changes of mood and emotion. It had acquired, by association, a traditional value-system. Convivial friendship, the masculine ethos, satirical wit, familiar communication - these were the areas in which "Standart Habby" excelled. However, a great poet, such as Fergusson or Burns, while responding sympathetically to this cluster of traditional values, could go beyond and from that base produce poetry of lasting significance. Burns inherited a varied epistolary tradition, native and non-native, and a verse-form uniquely fitted for his purpose and suited to his spirit. What he made of this inheritance is the concern of the remaining chapters.

## Chapter Two

### "I, Rob, am here"

In the previous chapter I traced the development of the verse-epistle in eighteenth-century Scotland. This was essential for determining the extent of Burns's achievement of and defining the nature of his debt to his forerunners. However, this tradition will not alone explain Burns's successes and failures in epistolary verse. There are, I shall argue, two other essential factors to be considered - Burns's personality, and his response to the various, disparate societies in which he lived, Mauchline, Edinburgh, and Dumfries.

For example, we may seek to explain Burns's scorn for the obsessive pursuit of wealth, apparent even in his earliest lyrics, as an example of his inheriting the traditional bias of the underdog or, quite differently, as his interpretation of contemporary, sentimental philosophy:

My riches a's my penny-fee,  
An' I maun guide it cannie, O;  
But warl's gear ne'er troubles me,  
My thoughts are a', my Nanie, O.

Our auld Guidman delights to view  
His sheep an' kye thrive bonie, O;  
But I'm as plythe that hauds his pleugh,  
An' has nae care but Nanie, O. (K4, ll. 21-28.)

However, we would also be justified in regarding the above lines as the response of a perceptive and impressionable young man to a local event - the disastrous collapse of the incompetently-managed Ayr Bank in 1773, a collapse which could well have represented the essential instability of a social organization whose values and standards were regulated in terms of financial success.

Burns was a local poet in that he was alert to and influ-

enced by the values, standards, and conditions of any society in which he lived. In Mauchline, he early recognized the possibilities for epistolary poetry of a rigidly-structured and clearly-defined society which produced rivalry and conflicting loyalties, as Ramsay had in Edinburgh. He valued, too, the existence in the village of a knowledgeable, responsive audience, such as Fergusson had had in the Cape Club, or in the readership of the Weekly Magazine. Moreover, the moral concern he felt for his local region was intensified by his appreciation that, as Augustan epistolary poetry had demonstrated, local poetry need not be parochial in its outlook or effect.

In Mauchline, Burns would not have thought of himself as an Ayrshire poet, but as a native of Kyle, one of Ayrshire's three traditional divisions. In poems like "The Vision" (K62), local events and personalities in Kyle engage his attention and evoke his praise. He views the fame of his region in historical perspective, and considers the value of his contribution, as poet, to its reputation. His knowledge of local society and history is extensive and accurate, and such concentration on the local is a crucial element in Burns's success. His inwardness with the history and condition of his region made possible the creation of that confident, telling poetic tone in the epistles. There, we hear the voice of a man certain of his facts. His concern for his district and his belief in its symbolic importance also convinced him that its attitude to religion, to poetry, and its moral welfare were all matters of some importance. This conviction is reflected in the propagandist, committed, concerned voice which speaks clearly in the epistolary verse.

But, the local situation influenced Burns and, thus, his epistolary verse in other, more direct ways. Life, in this part of Ayrshire, was hard. Land-values in South-West Scotland were inflated throughout most of Burns's lifetime to the extent that two determined

responsible farmers - the poet and his father - were obliged to lease land at rates which were out of all proportion to any conceivable productive returns. The change in ownership of estates, one result of the Ayr Bank failure, from established families to middle-class "managers" who strove to combine gracious living and profitability meant that innovatory agricultural methods were introduced without the due regard for local conditions which experience would have seen to be necessary. Return on investment became a prime consideration in rental. Burns, who was a shrewd and observant man of the land, understood this new situation all too well.<sup>1</sup> His awareness of the economic facts of life explains much of his fervent defence of individualism in the epistles, and his refusal to be merely a productive unit. His appreciation of the relationship between landlord and tenant, master and man, based on mutual respect for the other's humanity, ought to be remembered when one reads his epistles to Gavin Hamilton. His early experience of the factor who was determined to enforce a writ of sequestration at Lochlie sharpened Burns's perception of the corruption of human relations in a society where gain and cupidity were the prime regulators of behaviour.

However, the harsh toil of these years on his father's farms was relieved by visits to Kirkoswald where he "made greater progress in the knowledge of mankind."<sup>2</sup> This enlargement of the personality was continued in Irvine, not by reading of a different

<sup>1</sup> His letter to James Burness is a perceptive analysis of the agricultural decline. See The Letters of Robert Burns, ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson, I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), 15-16. Henceforth Ferguson's edition will be cited as F, pp. ...

<sup>2</sup> F, I, 111.



life in Thomson and Shenstone, but by direct experience of new acquaintances. In this important, bustling port, Burns enjoyed the liberating, influential friendship of Richard Brown who early recognized his poetic talent. His approbation, as Burns acknowledges, "gave me an idea of my own pieces which encouraged me to endeavour at the character of a Poet."<sup>3</sup>

Another outlet was the dancing-school in Tarbolton which Burns attended in 1779, "to give ...[his] manners a brush"! This angered his father who, until death, was concerned that his eldest son would not prove a reliable head of the family. The relationship between father and son was uncomfortable, though roughly affectionate. Gilbert Burns, the poet's rather ineffectual brother, and Dr. John Mackenzie, who attended William Burns in his last illness, describe a talented, but uncertain youth, awed into submission by a strict, domineering father.<sup>4</sup> Open revolt in the face of a man whom he admired, and probably loved, was hardly to be thought of. Instead, Burns usually preserved a sullen silence, until the conversation in the home turned to some topic of which he alone was master, and then he ventured forth on known ground, combating the intimidating presence of paternal experience with specialized knowledge.

Burns's father was not unrelievedly stern. The tolerant religious doctrine of A Manual of Religious Belief embodies teachings which William Burnes would have listened to in Dr. Dalrymple's liberal sermons in Ayr.<sup>5</sup> This work reveals a man whose gravity was under-

<sup>3</sup> F, I, 151.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert's account is to be found in Currie, op. cit., I, 60-61. Mackenzie's description of the poet's reserved nature occurs in Poems by Robert Burns (Edinburgh: Trustees of the Late James Morison, 1811), II, 262-64.

<sup>5</sup> William Burnes, A Manual of Religious Belief (Kilmarnock: M'Kie & Drennan, 1875).

pinned by a humane concern for the salvation of his children, and whose more liberal theology was to be rudely contrasted with the more deterministic religious doctrines encountered in Mauchline when the Burns family moved to Mossgiel in the Spring of 1784. His father's death in 1784, however, removed a check on the poet's conduct, and thereafter, he certainly experienced greater freedom of action and thought than he had known before.

The education which William Burnes strove to bestow on Robert and Gilbert was a source of enjoyment and frustration. Given the situation of parish-schools which lumped together indiscriminately sons of lairds with sons of tenant-farmers, irrespective of age or ability, it was in that context that Burns early felt the bitterness of talent unrewarded, and the lack of direction entailed in his humble situation.<sup>6</sup> However, the pleasure which Burns obtained from his various contacts with the predominantly English literature of his periods of education outweighed this chagrin, and the influences of the various authors to whom Murdoch introduced him, directly or indirectly, manifest themselves in different ways. His early poetry and his first Commonplace Book reflect his knowledge of and competence in the English tradition. Sterne and Mackenzie obviously influenced the young Burns's letter to William Niven, and shades of Young flit through a letter to his father from Irvine.<sup>7</sup> Adam Smith and Otway join forces in an unfortunate alliance in "A Penitential Thought, in the hour of Remorse" (K5) and the fashionable, protective attitude to animals appears in an early

<sup>6</sup> Burns recollects this feeling in his letter to Dr. John Moore, F, I, 107.

<sup>7</sup> F, I, 2-3; and E, I, 4-5

lyric, "Song, composed in August" (K2).

Avaunt, away! the cruel sway,  
Tyrannic man's dominion;  
The Sportsman's joy, the murd'ring cry,  
The flutt'ring, gory pinion! (ll. 21-24)

The influence of Burns's reading in literature was not confined to verbal allusions in poems and letters, but also manifested itself in structures of feeling. He often formed his conduct after models, glorious and inglorious. In his early prose letters, he compares himself, sometimes humorously, sometimes for serious ends, to one of "the lower orders of mankind"; to "one sent into the world, to see, and observe"; to "a poor Poet militant"; to "Pharaoh at the Red Sea, Darius at Arbela, Pompey at Pharsalia, ..."; to "a true son of the Gospel", and so on.<sup>8</sup> This does not imply that Burns was incapable of independent action or thought, or that his early life was a series of poses modelled on characters drawn from his reading. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that certain literary figures loom large in his writing and behaviour at this stage of his life. Hamlet, the sport of "outrageous Fortune", the man robbed of a role in life who questioned the validity of direct action and who alternated between depression and capricious folly, appears frequently in Burns's early verse and prose. Tom Jones, a very different character, appears as a thinly-disguised "Rob Mossgiel" in the song "O leave novels" (K43). Similarly, on the model of Pope and Bolingbroke, or Horace and Maecenas, Burns is always willing to construct for himself a poet-patron relationship with men such as Gavin Hamilton and John Ballantine, viewing each of them as a Scottish "Man of Ross".

The characters and situations which Burns encountered in his reading offered him a release from the drudgery of farm-labour. He was able to render his life tolerable by dramatizing his lowly situation

<sup>8</sup>F, I, 13; I, 13-14; I, 25; I, 29; I, 35.

and thus aligning himself with larger passions and more stirring events than ever seemed likely in village society. As his participation in the affairs of Mauchline grew, and the need to project his opinions and personality increased, he was to turn increasingly from prose to verse-epistles as a means of obtaining release, of justifying his actions, and of establishing contact with men of like mind. Before, that, however, Burns found another source of spiritual release and of psychological expansion in his involvement with Freemasonry and the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club.

Each of these organizations offered practicable, alternative models of society where fraternity, conviviality, honesty, and good-natured argument were the standards by which the members chose to exist. Here, Burns could taste the delights of exclusiveness, of apartness from the herd, with a corresponding increase in confidence and in the conviction of superior wisdom which so binds and unites a small, close-knit group within a larger, hostile society. In the development of Ramsay and Fergusson, as men and poets, the Easy Club and the Cape Club had fulfilled similar functions. In the former, Ramsay sharpened his wit in discussion and poetic badinage, and the Club's very existence was living proof of the possibility of combining patriotism and fellow-feeling in that Ciceronian virtue, friendship. As the earlier poet's expression of friendship was backed by a weighty, classical authority, so, too, Burns's stress on the importance of fraternity was the product of a similar, deeply-held conviction about society. In the Cape Club, Fergusson met with convivial fellow-spirits, such as Herd and Ruddiman, who shared his interest in and were appreciatively critical of vernacular poetry. For Burns, as for his poetic predecessors, the existence of such clubs satisfied a desire for friendship and provided a means of self-

expression. (His involvement with Masonry is discussed in Appendix Two.)

Burns's prose-correspondence was yet another means by which he could develop his growing personality. There, he could discuss topics and express opinions in a way that was forbidden to him at home or in public in village society. The early letters to William Niven, Thomas Orr, and John Tennant, Jr. are well-stocked with philosophical statements about the true end of life and speculations on equality. They also contain local gossip, raillery, ironic indignation, and reveal a need to dramatize and personalize. There is humorous exaggeration in the letter to John Arnot of Dalquhatswood and an ironic aping of the mercantile voice in the letter to John Tennant, but the first strikes us as strained and over-elaborate, whereas the second is clumsily-constructed.<sup>9</sup> The uncomfortable tone of each suggests that Burns had not yet found his true medium. He came to see that verse, especially that living, speaking verse which the "Standart Habby" form encouraged, provided a more satisfactory vehicle for his message. In 1785 and 1786, as his poetic output increases in quantity and range, those prose epistles which remain become shorter and more perfunctory. They contain less and less of his personal philosophy which, in turn, is to be found increasingly in his verse-epistles.

Encouraged by the ideals of Freemasonry and by the bonhomie of the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, Burns came to place a high value on friendship and on the loyalty of close acquaintances. He needed this sense of support for, by February of 1786, he was writing to a friend in Edinburgh that " ... Smith ... is the only friend I have now in Mauchline."<sup>10</sup> How this situation arose and the effect it had on

<sup>9</sup> F., I, 26-30 and I, 19-20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

Burns's epistolary verse requires that we undertake a brief survey of Mauchline, the village out of which Burns's finest verse-epistles were written.

From the Spring of 1784, when Robert Burns moved the family to Mossgiel, until after his Edinburgh visit, Mauchline was the focus of his poetic and social activity. It was an important village of approximately 900 inhabitants, standing on the intersection of two busy and important highways, the Ayr to Dumfries and Dumfries to Kilmarnock post-roads. Its various horse and cattle fairs, its annual race day, and its several ale-houses gave it a prominent place in the towns and villages of Ayrshire. It had a marked social stratification. Reputations were hard-won, and had to be protected at all costs. When the prosperous master-mason, James Armour, heard that his daughter was with child by a poor and notorious tenant-farmer, he prevailed upon Robert Aiken, an Ayr lawyer and Burns's friend, (as one sober burgher to another) to invalidate the promissory paper which Burns had given to Jean Armour, declaring marriage or an intention to marry. Naturally enough, Burns saw this as treachery and as a confirmation of a conspiracy by those in authority to frustrate his ends and re-assert their power.<sup>11</sup>

However, social gradations were upset by Freemasonry, which disregarded artificial barriers to social mobility and, more importantly, by religious controversy which cut across such boundaries, allying high and low in a common, factional cause. Ayrshire had long been theologically conservative and had, in earlier times, consistently striven for the establishment of Presbyterianism. It was loath to relinquish anything gained with such hardship, with the result that more liberal theological doctrines, formulated in the

<sup>11</sup> His letter to Gavin Hamilton on this matter, F., I, 24, is confused but, nevertheless, fairly buzzes with resentment and injured pride.

eighteenth century at the universities (most notably Glasgow) and, by mid-century, widely-disseminated, were resisted stubbornly by conservative areas of which Mauchline parish was one.

As Burns's poems show, doctrines such as election, original sin, reprobation, and grace, and questions of Church politics like patronage were still very much live issues in Mauchline in the 1780's. The Kirk, in the figure of the minister and the elders, had considerable powers of summons and of cross-examination. They could impose fines and punishments in their attempts to regulate the moral conduct of life in the parish. The effect of this close, unsympathetic scrutiny of private life was more insidious than the bare statement of the power suggests. Attempting to mould human nature by edict and legislation may now seem, to us, doomed to failure; yet, at the time, it had the effect of encouraging obedience and stifling criticism. The Kirk's powers to humiliate and ostracize exerted a pressure to conform to given standards and, necessarily, ensured that those who obeyed would look askance at, if not view with downright hostility, any departures from the norm.

The situation in the village must have been like some totalitarian states of today, with their emphasis on conformity and obedience. Repression of criticism, public humiliation, and punishments of varying degrees of hardship are still the usual fate for those who stray from the path, and for all rebels. Mauchline was more punitive than most parishes because the factional disputes which ravaged the traditionalist "Auld Licht" party supplied its probable enemies with dangerous ammunition. Only severe repression could stifle any budding tendency to criticize. There was, in Mauchline, that susceptibility to and suspicion of criticism which is produced when one group feels endangered by a larger force, yet remains

all-powerful within its own domain. The Mauchline conservatives were still fighting with weapons, and for territory, which the main body of the Church in Scotland had relinquished. Ranged against the Rev. William Auld (who was a genuinely pious man) and his vindictive Kirk Session was a body of liberal thinkers which contained, among others, Gavin Hamilton, a Mauchline lawyer, the Rev. John M'Math, assistant minister in Tarbolton, and, of course, Burns himself. The Kirk's powers of retaliation, however, were wide and skilfully deployed. Hamilton, for example, was accused of having withheld from the Kirk Session part of the stent-money, raised from the rents of the Heritors to relieve the genuinely poor. As litigation developed, he was also charged with such additional offences as having, "on the third Sabbath of January ... set out on his journey to Carrick tho' advised and admonished against it by the Minister" and having "habitually" neglected "the worship of God in his family".<sup>12</sup> Although a compromise was achieved on some issues, the fact that he was pursued with such dogged persistence and for such trivialities indicates the Kirk's powers of harrassment and their insistence on total obedience.

The situation in Mauchline was that of two opposed groups, one jealously guarding its traditional pre-eminence and power against an inevitable and encroaching liberalism, the other chafing at the restrictions placed on freedom of thought and action. It was a close, cloying, prying society in which actions were considered proper or improper, not according to any natural law, but insofar as they matched the standards decreed by authority. On this society, in late 1784, bursts Burns. His father has died earlier that year and he is now becoming conspicuous by his dress and his shocking

<sup>12</sup>See J.C. Glennie, "Gavin Hamilton and the Kirk Session of Mauchline", Burns Chronicle, 3rd ser., 19 (1970), 20-30.



opinions.<sup>13</sup> He is cutting a figure in Masonic circles and is a prime mover in the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club. He is already a poet, though none of his work has been shown to acquaintances in the neighbourhood. This early verse deals with conflict, - conflict between those obsessed by wealth and those to whom it is unimportant, between pride and servility, between true and false friendship. It abounds with metaphors of escape, as if Burns's reaction was then to turn and run. Songs predominate. The sentiment expressed in lyric form can have universal application, but lyric does not necessarily imply personal involvement of commitment. These early songs are linked thematically to the verse-epistles, but it was only when he began to write the latter that Burns consciously committed himself to the ideals expressed therein.

We have noted Burns's readiness to identify with larger characters or with situations which shared points of contacts with his own. This tendency, and other local factors like his friendship with influential liberals such as Gavin Hamilton and Robert Aiken, the pregnancies of Betty Paton and Jean Armour, his conspicuous popularity among like-minded cronies, all combined to make Burns conscious that he had a role to play in Mauchline. His function was to challenge authority, his stance that of the outsider. The challenges were to take different forms. He dressed distinctively; he formed friendships; he openly voiced controversial opinions on points of doctrine. His political awareness deepened and found expression in the fragment beginning, "When Guilford good ... " (K38), and he wrote his first truly bawdy poem, "My girl she's airy, she's buxom and gay," (K46). However, his most explicit and dangerous acts of defiance were the series of verse-epistles which he wrote and circulated in Mauchline

<sup>13</sup> F, I, 107.

and surrounding areas between 1784 and 1786.

These epistles are the means by which Burns identifies himself to those who sympathize with his stance, or can signal to others whom he hopes will share his views. Many factors came together that this should be so. His conspicuous situation in the village, his growing intellectual awareness, his appreciation of the legacy of the English and Scots literary traditions, especially his acquaintance with verse of Pope and Fergusson, convinced him that the verse-epistle was the inevitable form for one in his situation. He had used "Standart Habby" only once before late 1784, in "Poor Mailie's Elegy" (K25) which is in the ironic, satirical tradition of Ramsay and not in the more sombre, elegaic vein of Sempill of Beltrees' poem. However, with his realization that he has a part to play and, moreover, has an audience whose temper he could judge through personal intimacy or whose views he could guess by their reputation, Burns begins to carve for himself a place in the demonology of Mauchline's clerical orthodoxy, and, at the same time, in the wider history of the verse-epistle.

Whereas eighteenth-century epistolary poetry of the English tradition is conservative in spirit, Burns's work, though similarly embattled in tone, is a poetry of revolt. His verse-epistles have elements in common with the poetry of those other near-contemporary iconoclasts, Blake and Byron. They share the visionary, utopian, constructive force of the former, yet can express that in the provocative, sardonic, intensely personal voice of the latter. Burns's aim was not the single-minded destruction of the tyranny of clerical orthodoxy; that is too narrow a conception of his purpose. His early epistolary poetry was, rather, both an act of defiance and an act of faith. It resembles, in its totality, an "underground" newspaper,

filled with satire, with hope, with implausible dreams and aspirations. At times, it is hopelessly idealistic in its desire to construct an alternative society with an alternative morality, but it remains shrewdly critical of actuality, and always anti-authoritarian.

The roles which Burns had adopted in his prose letters and the literary types and characters with whom he had identified in his early verse had been defence-mechanisms in which to take refuge, or a form of compensatory activity for one who lacked a fixed aim. Now, however, Burns could begin to give memorable expression to what his experience of society and books had taught him. He was working with a genre which encouraged the adoption of roles and was writing from within a situation which must have seemed like the actualization of the themes of much of his early poetry - the conflicts between youth and age, prudence and abandon, wealth and poverty.

He regarded his situation and the stance he took as emblematic. It had a symbolic significance for others. This tendency is early revealed by the deliberate way in which he links his fate with the plight of larger historical or fictional characters whose fortunes were known to all. It becomes especially prominent in his epistolary verse. He firmly believes that the treatment he receives as man and poet from the society in which he lives is an indicator of that society's moral, political, and religious well-being. That is the significance of the quotation from Ramsay's epistolary verse which accompanied his Proposals, for Publishing ... :

Set out the brunt side o' your shin,  
For pride in Poet's is nae sin;  
Glory's the Prize for which they rin,  
                          And Fame's their jo;  
And wha blaws best the Horn shall win;  
                          And wharefore no?

As the outcome of local religious controversies in Mauchline and Ayrshire had, in Burns's eyes, consequences for every parish in

Scotland, so the treatment of the poet himself was a microcosm of the fate of all free spirits in a repressive and retributive society. The conviction that his verse and his actions are in the nature of test-cases lends power and pressure to the epistles. This explains the intense egocentricity of the verse-letters. "I, Rob, am here" is a defiant, triumphant challenge to Fate, to Authority, and to all the dull, dismal forces in opposition.<sup>11</sup> It is a vibrant affirmation of life itself.

The flexibility of the verse epistle and its ability to accommodate wildly divergent emotions and ideas were especially welcome to a man acquainted with contemporary Scottish philosophy. The capacity of the epistle for rendering the untutored overflow of sensation lay in its informality; it was, above all, a form for unrestricted, familiar communication. As there were to be no barriers of convention in the emotional exchanges of friends, so no form could be more suitable than this which seemed to erase all formal barriers of syntax and metre between the letter-writer and his correspondent. Moreover, one convention of epistolary verse, the conscious adoption of different personae or roles often within the same poem, allowed Burns to be different things to different men without insincerity or contradiction. The very freedom of the epistolary form gave Burns's quixotic nature ample room for expression. The different, occasionally conflicting, elements of his personality could co-exist happily within the ill-defined bounds of such verse.

The verse-epistles written in Mauchline were Burns's underground communications system and he used it for many and varied purposes. With it, he could broadcast to selected listeners material which would entertain or instruct. They formed the medium in which

<sup>11</sup>K58, 1.60.

he could strut, vaunt, and challenge before an audience of one (his correspondent), of several (those sympathetic members of the circle who, though not directly addressed, would almost certainly hear of the message), or of many (his clerical and lay opponents in Mauchline who, though excluded from the actual performance, could hear the derisory laughter engendered by it - they form a distant, but none the less essential audience for Burns to consider). Alternatively, the epistle could be the small room in which Burns confided his inmost hopes and desires to his closest acquaintances. Then, the very act of confiding was evidence of friendship, an act of faith in the shared principles of their alternative morality.

The verse-epistles are both private and public. They can give cathartic release in the joy of artistic creation, or can be a challenge to other poets and poetasters in the district to match Burns's skill. He uses the epistle to link the scattered forces which he wished to marshal against his dull, leaden foes in the Church, in politics, and in life. To its recipient, a verse-epistle from Burns could be a lifeline, a challenge, a source of humour, an appreciative thump on the back, or a considered appeal for support. His tone in these poems varies from the sentimental to the bawdy, and includes all emotional stops between. The choice of appropriate voice is superb, and quite unparalleled in the literature of his time. Few poets, indeed, have ever managed so well the bewildering range of voices we hear in the epistles. He can mimic the grim, overweening sneers of the "unco' guid" who have just caught out their prime antagonist, and can capture the honest, outraged indignation of an innocent man chafing at petty accusations. He can be duly respectful to old age, or coarsely bawdy with like-minded youth. His verse pulses with life and throbs with emotion; verbs of action fairly

leap out at us. Yet he can also be tranquil and serious.

We need not search for moderation in these epistles. They were written by a man who felt constrained and restricted by clerical authority and by social conventions which expected humility from one of his status. Burns was striking out at the atmosphere of insidious control which years of habitual obedience and subsequent loss of independent spirit had produced. Some of his blows are hard and ungentlemanly. He is out to prompt, amuse, and shock. He needed to know that others were in the struggle with him for, although patronized and befriended by certain members of the middle-class, and though he eventually attracted the notice of the aristocracy and the Edinburgh gentry, he was still an outsider to those in positions of authority and too proud of his independence to feel secure in the favours of patrons. Of the poetry written at Mauchline, the satirical monologues like "Holy Willie's Prayer" (K53) or "The Twa Dogs. A Tale" (K71) are no less deeply felt than the epistles, and are thematically similar. The verse-letters, however, are personal acts of defiance. They are Burns's manifesto.

In this chapter and the next, I shall subject the early epistles to close, critical scrutiny. Only thus can we recognize the subtle control of tone, structure and movement which Burns exercises in the different poems. This method also permits us to view his personal and deeply-felt morality evolving in response to the pressure of society and local events and personalities. In this way, too, we can attempt to fix the elusive, spoken quality of Burns's best epistolary verse. This is crucial, for his very success in creating a colloquial tone has detracted, to some extent, from the recognition of the serious nature of certain epistles. The seeming ease with which Burns speaks can blind us to his metrical skill and to the

significance of his statement. The content has been undervalued because it is couched in a throwaway line. In what follows, I shall undertake the reflation of Burns's stock.

Burns's "Epistle to J. R[ankine], Enclosing some Poems" (K47) is probably his first verse-epistle, but the chronology of the poet's life at this period is so uncertain that an exact dating is impossible.<sup>12</sup> The immediate cause of the epistle was the pregnancy of Betty Paton who had been a servant in the Burns' home at Lochlie. When the family moved to Mossgiel in 1784, she returned to her parents' home at Largieside, near Tarbolton, where, in May 1785, she bore a child which Burns acknowledged as his. Tradition has it that it was Rankine who informed Burns of her pregnancy. Certainly, Burns seems to have been aware of her condition by November 1784, but this alone does not allow us to fix the date of the epistle precisely.<sup>13</sup> His reference to the "Poacher-Court" (l.47), if Jean Armour's later case may be considered typical, would give us a date approximately five months after conception, when the pregnancy would be sufficiently advanced to be noticed by the lynx-eyed members of the Kirk-Session. If, on the basis of the date of birth, we can assume conception to have been in September 1784, this would suggest January 1785 as the approximate date for the composition of the epistle. However, as there is no record of either Burns or Paton having appeared before the Kirk-Session, the date must remain a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless, a reading of the poem reveals one certain fact. Burns was not writing an informative epistle, with the aim of breaking the news of his predica-

<sup>12</sup> On p.103, I shall argue that there are good grounds for believing that Burns's earliest verse-epistle is that which he wrote to David Sillar.

<sup>13</sup> See F., I, 20-21.

ment to Rankine. Rather, the tone of the poem assumes that his correspondent is familiar with the fact of Paton's pregnancy. Only on the basis of this shared knowledge could Burns feel free to write with such abandon and adventurous irony.

Rankine had been a near neighbour of Burns when the poet's family lived at Lochlie. Like Burns, he was a farmer with the same rural background, but a more important common bond was their talent for and enjoyment of iconoclastic and anti-clerical wit.<sup>14</sup> To this conspicuous character, with whom he was closely acquainted, whose brand of coarse, rustic humour he enjoyed, and of whose stance on religious controversy he was certain, Burns chose to write this epistle. He wrote partly to amuse and partly to obtain catharsis in composition, but the epistle ought also to be seen as the opening shot in a campaign of self-projection and self-justification which Burns undertook in Mauchline. Already, he is selecting from his experience certain facts and inventing others, to create an image which he will cultivate and use in his tussle with the Kirk and with society.

The epistle attacks hypocrisy and the insensitive meddling of the Kirk which, in Burns's eyes, overreacts to situations which do not concern it. To this end, Burns employs subtle irony, well-sustained imagery, and his unequalled talent for mimicry and racy narrative.

He immediately draws his correspondent into the poem with a swift, telling sketch which fixes those aspects of Rankine's personality which Burns admired - his quick wit, his love of conviviality, and his masculinity. Burns's concern for structure is

<sup>14</sup>For the traditions concerning Rankine's anti-authoritarian ripostes and jokes, see The Life and Works of Robert Burns, ed. Chambers, rev. Wallace (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1896), I, 120.



evident in the phrase "wale o' cocks" (l. 2) which, at the outset, introduces the fowl imagery that is to be elaborated in the narrative of ll. 37-72. This descriptive phrase compares Rankine to that symbol of proud masculinity and strutting domination, the cock. Burns knows his correspondent sufficiently well to be certain that his response, as a cock, to the "bonie hen" (l.40) would be the same as that of Burns the hunter. Unlike the Kirk, both would see it as their legitimate and natural prey.

Burns, however, does not elaborate on this yet, choosing instead to concentrate on Rankine's talent for exposing hypocrisy. The first part of the epistle is given over to a satirical attack on the "godly" and their deceit, yet Burns is all the while preparing for the text of the parable he will deliver in ll. 37-72. The same hypersensitivity to criticism (common to all arbitrary authority which feels its power threatened or set at naught) which Burns encounters in the actions of the "Poacher-Court", is evident in the fate which the "Saunts" anticipate for Rankine. Such is their capacity for revenge and their certainty of authority that Rankine will die no ordinary death but, like the rebellious Korah, will be swallowed up by the earth (Numbers. xvi. 31-33). This enormity of punishment for what both men regarded as trivial offences (if that) is the satiric core of the poem. With superb irony, Burns uses the long, deep monosyllables of "Straught to auld Nick's" (l. 6) to suggest Rankine's impending drop through the mire to the bottomless pit.

In stanza two, Burns moves on to the offensive, denying the validity of the unstated doctrine of election by juxtaposing the words "devil" and "Saunts" in l.9. With such a juxtaposition, he points to a truth about the human condition. "Saunts" (or the elect) could never be "devils", if the doctrine of election held

good. But Burns knows that humanity is of a piece, that there are no 'Saunts', sure of salvation, nor any "unregenerate Heathen", condemned to damnation. Instead, his world comprises mere mortals, some of whom are more careful of their reputation or more adept at concealing their faults than others. He can take the risk of conveying his argument by the precise use of Biblical references and theological terminology because he knows Rankine intimately, and can be certain that an Ayrshire farmer of his intelligence and status would respond immediately to such subtlety. This second stanza is essential to the development of Burns's argument but, by paying tribute, unobtrusively, to Rankine's practical joke, he also uses this "in-joke" to reinforce the sense of shared experience.

Burns regards Rankine's trick as having stripped away a layer of pretence to reveal the mere mortal. He elaborates the image of removing protective guises in stanza three where he controls the reader's response simply by changes in voice:

Hypocrisy, in mercy spare it!  
 That holy robe, O dinna tear it!  
 Spare't for their sakes wha aften wear it,  
                                   The lads in black;  
 But your curst wit, when it comes near it,  
                                   Rives't aff their back.       (11. 13-18)

The jerky, tearful movement of ll. 13 and 14 reads like a desperate appeal by the embarrassed "Saunts" as they stand before Rankine and Burns, their patchy gowns of hypocrisy (threadbare with constant use) revealing more and more. The spitting consonants and sneering internal rhyme of l. 15 sounds Burns's harsh aside, as he dismisses their plea, saying, "It's likely, isn't it!" Exultation is the keynote of l. 17 as, with the concentrated power of "rives", one can almost hear their rags being ripped aside.

The warning which Burns gives in l.19 is ironic, but it also contains a serious element. He knew the hornet's nest which

an outspoken poet could stir up and would have felt considerable sympathy for one whose talent for satire could have led him into conflict with authority. This common commitment and awareness of its dangers explains the defiant anger and conspiratorial friendship of the poem. Throughout Burns is both praising Rankine's stand and seeking to win his approval, but in the opening stanzas his method is more subtle than the coarse, entertaining narrative of ll. 37-72. Yet, as in most of Burns's epistles, the speed and ease with which the verse moves can conceal subtle and complex effects. One such instance is the phrase "Blue-gown badge an' claithing" (l.20) in which Burns concentrates his anger. It is, obviously, derogatory, for it links the "elect" with a rabble of licensed beggars. Moreover, it suggests that hypocrisy is their distinguishing feature, just as the Blue-gown singles out the beggar. Finally, as the wearing of the gown by a beggar permitted him to act in ways normally stigmatized by society - that is, to beg - so too, Burns says, the hypocrisy of the "elect" protects them from the censures which apply to the rest of humanity, to the "unregenerate Heathen". Strip them of that, and their conduct will appear as blatantly wrong as anyone else's.

At this high point of condemnation, Burns takes care to involve Rankine as an equal, in the phrase "Like you or I" (l.24), and this sense of involvement in a common cause ends the first section of the poem. In ll. 1-24, Rankine is presented as the fittest man to hear Burns's particular experience of "Auld Licht" hypocrisy, for he has been presented as a connoisseur of bawdy humour and an irreverent spirit. Who better to relish the racy narrative, and who better to applaud Burns's vow to wreak havoc among the "Game" next year? With stanza four, the peak of Burns's anger has been reached and passed. He has dissipated his spleen by the direct attack of

abuse and satire. In the second part of the epistle he will laugh his opponents to scorn. Having openly declared his principles to Rankine, he embodies them in a parable designed to entertain his correspondent and to give one aspect of his many-sided personality free rein. Burns follows the classical epistolary convention of mingling invective and ridicule, anger and laughter in the same poem. In ll. 1-24, we met Burns the chastiser. In ll. 37-72, we encounter Rob Mossgiel.

Stanza five is an interlude, a pause in which the teller of tales lets his audience settle before launching forth into his narrative. Yet, the references to Rankine the poet are quite deliberate, for Burns is now inviting him to cast a poet's eye over the tale which follows. The knowledge that his epistolary verse would be read by practising poets was an important factor in Burns's method. He was always conscious of his correspondent, and so wrote to evoke and manipulate a response. This lends the epistles written in Mauchline a directness which they lack when written out of other environments. Burns opens stanza six in a mock-penitential attitude which is designed to contrast incongruously with the licentious freedom of expression which follows. Such cavalier treatment of the reader's expectations is a good example of Burns's appreciation that he was writing for an audience whom he could use as an integral part of his epistle.

From l. 37 onwards, he flaunts a nose-thumbing defiance and an arch delight in his manhood. His narrative argues against the notion that sexual love, freely entered into by both parties, should be subject to the restraints and penalties of the "Poacher Court". He challenges the right of authority to interfere with such natural, impulsive, (and in his eyes, therefore) harmless acts, and refuses to

acknowledge the fitness of the "auld, us'd hands" as judges. They are, after all, simply humans, not the paragons of virtue they pretend to be. Had Rankine, his friend, not just demonstrated this? The mood is identical to that of an earlier poem, the "Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous" (K39). It is significant, however, that Burns's justification now takes the form of an indignant and entertaining protest, and not the abstract philosophizing of the earlier poem. The change is due to Burns's choice of the epistolary form, and his appreciation of a responsive audience.

As Rankine exposed the man under the elect's cloak of hypocrisy, so Burns now adds insult to injury by revealing how ineffective is the Kirk's power to curb his eminently natural behaviour. Far from being cowed, he is the more determined:

But by my gun, o' guns the wale,  
 An' by my pouter an' my hail,  
 An' by my hen, an' by her tail,  
                   I vow an' swear!  
 The Game shall Pay, owre moor an' dail,  
                   For this, niest year.       (11. 55-60)

By allying himself with a traditional symbol of defiance towards authority, the poacher, Burns suggests that the Kirk's interference is as arbitrary and unnatural as those laws which try to convert wild game into one man's property. It is natural for game to stray and men to hunt, as it is for male and female to make love. Why all the fuss, is Burns's indignant question.

It would be pedantic to gloss the extended allegory of 11. 37-72 to demonstrate Burns's expertise in venereal slang, or to point to his narrative skills, but one must mention briefly some aspect of both to make his achievement clear. Rankine's rural, convivial background would ensure his appreciation of Burns's salacious "double entendre" in the word "shot" (l.50). "Shot" is, of course, the term for the discharge of pellets from a gun, but it also has the

more specific (and bawdily appropriate) veterinary connotation, readily available to those who knew and worked with animals, of "an issue of fluid". This linguistic skill is paralleled by Burns's effective handling of the narrative. He varies the tone of the speaking voice throughout, from the colloquial reminiscence of stanza seven to the indignation of ll. 46-48. Exaggerated description in phrases like "suspected for the plot" (l.51) and "scorn'd to lie" (l.52) are deliberately used to conjure up an image of Inquisition-like grillings, one more hit at the over-reaction of the Kirk. Burns vows (ll.55 ff.), exclaims (ll. 67 ff.), determines (ll. 61 ff.), is resigned (ll. 73 ff.), and all this in verse that is quite natural, carrying the narrative forward with realism and ease. His intimacy with Rankine's character meant that he could write without fear of reproach, without having to hedge or defend himself. Thus, the sense of an unrestrained spirit, chafing at bonds imposed by an unsympathetic society, comes through loud and clear.

This epistle is angry but entertaining. Burns's pride in his manhood is greater than his quarrel with the Kirk, with the result that he is content to be abusive and funny. He develops no particular philosophy in this poem which is intended primarily to claim kinship of spirit and arouse amusement. The epistle to Sillar, however, is very different because, I suggest, of the different circumstances in which it was written, and because his correspondent occupied a unique place in Burns's early life at Mauchline.

Burns's acquaintance with Sillar began at some point in 1781, for in May of that year Sillar was admitted a member of the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club. He was a year younger than Burns, sufficiently well-educated to have begun a school at Commonsides, near

Tarbolton, and was known as a fiddler and poet.<sup>15</sup> His perceptive account of Burns in Tarbolton shows him to have been wary at first of this conspicuous "character" with the cutting wit and then to have been drawn by his powerful personal charm into something resembling youthful infatuation.<sup>16</sup> Their friendship was cemented in the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, founded by Burns and others as a friendly debating society. The rules of that organization place a high value on egalitarianism, comradeship, and trust. They record a fashionably sentimental-erotic attitude to women, and express an understandable bias against "Great Folk".<sup>17</sup> This type of fraternal conviviality obviously appealed to Sillar, who joined with Burns's brother, Gilbert, to form, in 1786, the Mauchline Conversation Society which likewise stressed camaraderie and debated philosophic or sentimental matters of academic interest.<sup>18</sup>

Though Sillar moved to Irvine in 1783, the friendship between

<sup>15</sup>In the title of the poem in the Adam MS, "An Epistle to Davy, a brother Poet, Lover, Ploughman and Fiddler", Burns recollects shared experiences and claims kinship of spirit and status. He concentrates on those aspects of his correspondent's personality to which the poem is designed to appeal.

<sup>16</sup>In Poems by Robert Burns (Edinburgh: Trustees of the Late James Morison, 1811), II, 257.

<sup>17</sup>A description of the Club and its rules is given in The Works of Robert Burns, ed. J. Currie (Liverpool: Cadell and Davies, 1800), I, 107-10, and 365-69. The ideal of happiness expressed in the tenth rule reads like an early prose draft of this epistle.

<sup>18</sup>In the Kilmarnock Standard, 26 June, 1892, extracts from the minute-book of the Society were published.

the two men continued, as their correspondence in prose and verse demonstrates.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, there is a tradition, the truth of which is impossible to establish, that Burns acted as a "Second" to Sillar in his courtship of Peggy Orr, a servant at Stair House.<sup>20</sup> If this is indeed true, there is another bond to link the two men, but one need not rely on tradition to discover that they shared, in their published poetry at least, an idealistic view of women. We have, as evidence, Burns's references in this epistle to his "darling Jean" and the poetry which Sillar published in 1789.<sup>21</sup> Although his work is obviously modelled on Burns's Kilmarnock edition in an effort to emulate his success, we cannot assume that everything in this volume is simply stolen from Burns. Instead, it would be more realistic to believe that the two men, from their early acquaintance, shared a common body of ideas and beliefs, and that these ideas, confirmed by experience, inevitably found expression in their published work. In his Preface, Sillar presents himself as an inspired rustic Bard, spontaneously obeying the promptings of natural impulse. Woman's love alone can make tolerable the harsh life which men of his class must endure. Composition is unrestrained and frequently prompted by the beauty of the natural world. The upper-classes are foolish and frivolous, and intolerance and hypocrisy are crimes against humanity.

In short, Sillar was educated, independent, a lover of the

<sup>19</sup> See F., II, 3 and 82. Burns helped Sillar with the sale of his poetry and offered sympathy when he could afford nothing else.

<sup>20</sup> In the manner which Burns describes in his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore, F., I, 110.

<sup>21</sup> David Sillar, Poems (Kilmarnock: John Wilson, 1789).



"female Sex", and steeped in the commonplaces of sentimental literature. As a devoted clubman, he obviously enjoyed male companionship and shared secrets, and valued the ideals of friendship and egalitarianism. He was shrewd enough to appreciate Burns's conspicuous position in the restricted world of Tarbolton and was sympathetic to his stand. Like Burns, he had ambitions. He was dissatisfied with the lot which his status assigned him. He was, therefore, an obvious confidant, but Burns was prompted to address his first epistle to Sillar by the particular circumstances under which he heard it praised.

Gilbert, Burns's brother, recorded the development of the epistle.<sup>22</sup> He first heard part of it in the summer of 1784, when he told Burns that he thought "it would bear being printed and that it would be well received by people of taste." In particular, he felt that it was distinguished from "other Scotch poetry ... by a strain of interesting sentiment." The composite nature of the poem would have been obvious had we lacked Gilbert's account, but it helps us to understand the epistle's formal faults more readily, such as the intrusiveness of stanzas nine and ten. It also explains why such sentimentality should be brought forward so stridently in this epistle. Previously, the high sentimentalism of Burns's verse had remained hidden in his first Commonplace Book, and was not intended for eyes other than his own. Moreover, in late 1784, he was not yet accustomed to sending his poetry to friends for criticism or advice. Consider the effect therefore, when, on giving Gilbert a preview, he hears the epistle praised in

<sup>22</sup> The Works of Robert Burns, ed. J. Currie, 2nd ed., rev. (London: Cadell and Davies, 1801), III, 380-81.

the highest terms, and the sentimental aspect singled out as distinctive. This alone might account for the "strain of interesting sentiment", but another factor influenced the content and style of the poem more decisively, namely the tantalizing prospect that it might "bear being printed", for it "would be well received by people of taste".

But Burns had made none of his poetry public before this. He is consequently apprehensive of sending the verses "to some Magazine". Before exposing himself in this way, he wants the reaction of some friend on whose judgement he can rely. What, then, should he do? Obviously, send the epistle to the like-minded Sillar, the ideal sounding-board. From this friend who shared Burns's taste for poetry, for Sternean sentimental-eroticism, and his hatred of arrogant pride, he could receive a valuable critical opinion as to "how it would take". This, I suggest, explains the unusual tone of this epistle. The combination of Sillar's personality and the circumstances of composition explain the gravity of the poem, its uncharacteristic stanza-form, and its high sentimentalism. It is a poetic "performance". Burns is nervously trying out his many talents before an audience whom he knows to be appreciative and sympathetic. He writes a showpiece epistle.

This verse-epistle is possibly Burns's first. Before he could write the epistle to Rankine and the other early verse-epistles, he needed to attempt the definition of his moral code and synthesize his reading and experience into a coherent whole. The first Common-place Book and certain prose epistles had performed this service so far, but they were unsatisfactory in that the formal restraints inherent in the conventions of the prose epistle and private jottings did not allow Burns the freedom and sense of reciprocated interest which the verse-epistle furnished. The "Epistle to Davie" is an ambitious

and uncharacteristic attempt to formulate a philosophy of life based on a synthesis of Burns's reading in Augustan literature and philosophy, and on his experience to date.

Burns's motivation, his desire to impress, is apparent throughout. He chooses a stately metre which is not an essential part of the vernacular epistolary tradition although, as we saw in Chapter One, it had been used infrequently. He handles this "Cherry and the Siae" stanza exceptionally well, exploiting the possibilities it offered for contrast within the stanza and for aphoristic statement. This stanza-form does not encourage the colloquial ease of "Standart Habby", but it has its peculiar qualities which Burns appreciated. In stanza one, for example, he uses the individual units of meaning to narrow the focus of the reader and, like a skilled film-director, entices us into the heart of the poem by reducing the scope of our visual field from Ben Lomond to the cottage to the room until we, too, are beside Burns at his "chimla lug" and are, therefore, sharing his situation and his reasons for justified anger.

A second indication of Burns's determination to impress is the fact that in no other epistle does he draw so heavily on ideas and the expression of them encountered in his reading. Pope's Essay on Man dominates the poem. There are allusions to it in phrasing and choice of word, but Burns's most obvious debt is to the avowed moral concern of Augustan epistolary verse.<sup>23</sup> Like Pope, he attacks and constructs,

<sup>23</sup> Burns's intention in this epistle is similar to Pope's as stated in "The Design" which prefaces The Essay on Man, namely of "forming a temperate yet not inconsistent, and a short yet not imperfect system of Ethics" (Poems, ed. Butt (London: Methven, 1963), p.502). Several aspects of the philosophy which Burns develops can be paralleled in Pope's poem. Compare, for example, Burns's stanza five with Pope's ll. 65-66 from Epistle IV of the Essay, "If then to all Men Happiness was meant, / God in Externals could not place Content". Compare, too, Burns's stanza seven with ll. 194-95 of the same epistle. However, Pope's acceptance of inequality as a necessary part of the "Universal Plan" was not so welcome to Burns's democratic spirit, and in this epistle there is an undeniable tension generated by the incompatibility of Burns's experience and his reading.

using the epistle as the legitimate means of building a credible set of rules by which to live. The intellectual core of the poem is stanzas three, four, and five where Burns develops his ideas on the possibility of men attaining content and bliss, and the validity of the routes by which they choose to approach this ideal. This philosophy also draws heavily on Adam Smith's idea of the "sympathetic heart" as does his belief in the power of love and friendship rely for its effusive expression on Goldsmith and Sterne. Throughout the epistle, Burns alludes to literary models, to the Bible, and to ideals, which he knew Sillar shared. The philosophy is designed to appear workable and to appeal to all men of their situation who could share their assumptions and beliefs. Burns would soon deliver his ideas with humour and with refreshing ease but, in this epistle, he is more deliberate and formal. There are few wild swings of the emotional pendulum, and very little autobiographical detail as justification. Nevertheless, the poem's movement is controlled by emotion; it is not a versified treatise.

This is obvious from the first stanza. The poem is aimed deliberately at Sillar because Burns knew that this friend alone was capable of appreciating it and responding to it critically. With the phrase "hing us owre the ingle" (1.3), Burns involves him as an equal from the outset. He and his ideas may still be in a minority, but with Sillar's companionship he is no longer in a minority of one. The opening stanza has several functions. It introduces the idea of discomfort and proposes, as a solution which makes it tolerable, an activity which they are both fitted to practise, namely the composition of "hamely, westlin jingle". It introduces the element of contrast which is the recurrent theme of the epistle and as an answer to which Burns offers his unifying

philosophy. In this stanza, the contrast is between Them and Us. As the epistle develops, it is broadened to include discontent and happiness, true and false Worth, and rich and poor. Finally, this opening stanza contains the observation which prompts the exasperated anger of stanza two, and so begins the pattern of emotional development. The argument progresses with an emotional logic, within the smaller confines of the individual stanza, and throughout the entire epistle. For example, the frustration of ll. 15-20 is counterbalanced by the statement of proud conviction in ll. 21-24 which is, in turn, capped by the aphoristic realism of ll. 25-28. This sentiment is expanded at length in the following two stanzas which celebrate the positive virtues of Burns's and Sillar's situation. It is given final expression in the hammer-blow lines of stanza five which, though in negative form, is, paradoxically the ultimate positive statement of Burns's philosophy. With the ideal outlined, Burns's scorn and anger is aroused when he contemplates how far reality falls short of it. Stanza six attacks this status quo and in seven, reassured by the convincing demonstration of his opponents' inferiority, Burns can champion the virtues of his particular situation. His life and Sillar's is undeniably harsh, however, and this prompts him to make plain in stanza eight those factors which make it tolerable, even enjoyable - namely, love and friendship. There then follows two stanzas of effusive extemporizing on this theme as the poetic and philosophic climax of the poem which ends, awkwardly, with an intrusively colloquial farewell.

Burns is concerned that his philosophy be seen to include all men. It may spring from personal experience, but it is not a singular solution. In stanza two, therefore, Burns carefully widens the scope. "I" becomes "a body's ". "Coofs on countless thousands" are contrasted with "best o' chieles". He deliberately intro-

duces religious overtones of universal applicability with the phrase "our daily bread", and "Davie" is appealed to as a witness to confirm the validity of Burns's proposals. True happiness, he argues, does not lie in externals like power or wealth. These are attained by the few at the expense of others. Burns sees happiness as the birth-right of every man, whatever his station. He therefore develops his philosophy by using the figure of the beggar who, of all men, has least. Yet, he too can achieve "content". The discomfort of his life cannot rob him of it. It is his only property and as open and available to him as the natural world through which he journeys.

This philosophy of life is argued and developed in stanzas three and four with all the subtlety of construction that the form allows. In stanza three, Burns states the obvious in ll. 29-31. In line 32, he gives his reply with calm conviction, and elaborates it in ll. 33-34. The notion of 'content' is further refined in ll. 35-38 which are crucial to the argument but which, because of the stanza's unique form, seem to stand independent as an observed truth. Finally, the ultimate consolation of the beggar's life is given. He, at least, has none of the financial worries of the millionaire. Burns continues this argument by the technique of the catechism in the fourth stanza. A question is posed, answered, and then elaborated to provide a further justification. However, Burns reserves his most convincing argument for stanza five. There, he uses all his poetic skills at this core of the poem to define concisely and memorably what he has been formulating in the previous stanzas. Here, Burns refuses to argue. He states what is, to him and Sillar, the obvious, but he states it with such peremptory force and precision that it has a singularly persuasive power.

With the succession of negatives in ll. 57-68, Burns's pro-

cedure is rejection. He lists the aims and standards of the "beau monde" as a marked contrast to the lot of the beggar and the wanderer with whom he and Sillar have identified themselves. He then proceeds to cast each one aside as worthless and insubstantial. The rejection of rank, of wealth, of position has a manifesto-like force, for Burns is confident of Sillar's entire agreement and because he has skillfully brought his argument to this climax of affirmation. Such persuasive force is achieved by careful phrasing and punctuation. In 11. 57-60, for example, Burns varies the pace by combining end-stopped with run-on lines. "Purchase" (1. 59) is heavily ironic, for it implies the very outlook which he is condemning, and the pause before "mair" gives that word an appropriate force. The pattern of rejection is interrupted only in the final two lines of the stanza, and these are the centre of the epistle:

The heart ay's the part ay,  
That makes us right or wrang. (11. 69-70)

This states Burns's belief positively and triumphantly. The repetition of the internal rhyme "ay" is used to suggest the permanence and durability of his philosophy. This care is apparent in Burns's use of individual words like "blest". Used four times within forty-two lines at 11. 32, 62, 66, and 74, it has a slightly different meaning each time. The religious overtones, however, remain largely unexploited until stanza six where Burns uses the word as an integral part of his argument that man is equal before God, regardless of his temporary situation on earth. The possibility of Divine favour, like the possibility of achieving happiness, is open to all men, even to Burns and Sillar "Wha drudge and drive thro' wet and dry". The anger in stanza six is directed at the arrogance of those higher in the social scale who are casually indifferent to the notion of reward for "good works". For the poet,

such an assumption of non-accountability places them with the "elect" and provokes Burns's scornful incredulity in the repeated interrogative, "Think ye".

This modulates to an expression of regret in ll. 77-84 which is a crucial element in the emotional development of the poem. Burns regards their modish lack of concern more in sorrow than in anger. They, and not Burns and Sillar, are victims of their position which, by shielding them from the harsh realities of the world, has also removed the necessity of contemplating the consequences of their actions. These lines are essential to the argument if the acquiescence of stanza seven is not to seem a servile acceptance of the status quo. Instead, the misfortunes which Burns and Sillar encounter have an educative function. Poverty demands a just appraisal of one's ability and a clear perception of priorities. Adversity gives no opportunity for foolish excess. To meet it, one requires a courageous spirit and the fortitude echoed in these self-sufficient end-stopped lines:

They gie the wit of Age to Youth;  
They let us ken oursel; (ll. 91-92)

Their life, however, is not unrelievedly harsh as Burns's two stanzas on love and friendship are intended to demonstrate. The high sentimentalism of stanzas nine and ten is intrusive and is to be explained by the circumstances of composition and the personality of Burns's correspondent. Nevertheless, it can also be justified by the emotional development of the poem. The core of Burns's argument was the final two lines of stanza five, but that statement of conviction was made in terms of what his philosophy was not. To balance that, Burns must give a positive celebration of the virtues of his philosophy and devote the same rhetorical attention to its statement as he did to the rejection of his opponents' beliefs. In these two



stanzas, he attempts to provide visible proof of his philosophy's importance and universal validity by celebrating its central themes, fraternity and love, in verse that is appropriately heightened. Having destroyed the false gods of his protagonists, he constructs a temple on which no expense or decorative flourish has been spared.

However, the classical English in which he attempts to convey the spiritually serious ill accords with the deprecating humour of the vernacular which ends the poem. Burns has not yet learned how to combine the serious and the irresponsible effectively within one poem. His instinct was true in that the epistle was the only form in which his antithetical and quixotic nature could find expression. Its informality and capacity for accommodating conflicting ideas and emotions were undeniable attractions, but Burns had yet to understand that informality was not synonymous with clumsy juxtaposition. The eminently satisfactory combination of grave and gay, angry and humorous in his next epistle to Lapraik reveals that Burns had mastered the form and realized its full potential.

John Lapraik received, in all, three epistles from Burns between April and September, 1785. As a group of verses, they reveal a man who was seeking the companionship and approval of other poets because he regarded them as sympathetic and convivial individuals, and because he believed they had a unique insight and capacity for truth. In these epistles, poetry preserves a vision of the world which is closed to prose. He is concerned to encourage poetry because it has become for him a symbol of an alternative social order. At this stage in Mauchline, it is poetry, not religious controversy, which links him with fellow-spirits who recognize intuitively its spiritual and symbolic significance. In the epistolary correspondence with Lapraik, poetry and the poetic spirit is the key to a better world. The contrasts and the sense of opposed forces encountered in the

"Epistle to Davie" remain, but to this is added the distinctive, personal voice of the epistle to Rankine (K47). For the first time, Burns creates a flexible and coherent range of speech which can combine without incongruity the visionary and the practical, the critical and the constructive.

Unlike Sillar and most of Burns's other correspondents in Mauchline, Lapraik was of Burns's father's generation, a fact which explains the respectful tone of this epistle and his stress on reckless youth. The facts of Lapraik's eventful life were probably known to Burns before he began the correspondence. The older man had married, in 1766, Margaret Rankine, sister of the John Rankine whom Burns knew intimately in Tarbolton. It is inconceivable that his misfortune did not form the subject of conversation at Adamhill during Burns's residence in Tarbolton. Lapraik had trusted the Ayr Bank of Douglas, Heron, and Co., the collapse of which in August, 1773, heavily implicated him and ultimately ruined him. Although he struggled for several years to repay his own debts and those for which he had stood surety, his creditors insisted on his being jailed, largely to provoke recalcitrant "friends" to act as security for remaining sums owed. This strategy had the desired effect, and Lapraik was soon released, but not before his experience had prompted him to write poetry in earnest. One consequence of this was that his Poems, On Several Occasions were published in 1788.<sup>24</sup> Like Sillar and others, he was exploiting the taste for vernacular poetry which Burns's success had aroused, but it is unfair to ascribe all his beliefs to servile copying of Burns. The similarity of outlook in Lapraik, and Sillar, and Burns is more correctly traced to their common status and shared experience of life.

<sup>24</sup> John Lapraik, Poems, On Several Occasions (Kilmarnock: John Wilson, 1788).

Lapraik describes his poetry as "merely the effect of his own observations, on nature, men, and things, and these huddled together without any order or method" (p.3). This observer of men and their ways takes great delight in the relief from labour which conviviality brings, and can face Fate with the support of loyal friends. He scorns the blind pursuit of wealth which he knows, from bitter personal experience, destroys the common humanity which ought to join men together:

Mankind a common system is  
 And should support  
 Each other, in their stations here,  
 And them comfort.<sup>25</sup>

Burns and Lapraik shared a utopian vision which the former quickly recognized in the song by Lapraik when he heard it at "a rockin". The mutual passion of husband and wife which excludes all else and protective male tenderness are the two elements in "When I upon thy bosom lean" which instantly attracted Burns.<sup>26</sup> He later sent his version of this song to James Johnson for inclusion in The Scots Musical Museum, appending the following revealing note in an interleaved copy of that work:

This song was the work of a very worthy, facetious old fellow, John Lapraik, late of Dalfram, near Muirkirk; which little property he was obliged to sell in consequence of some connexion as security for some persons concerned in that villanous bubble, THE AYR BANK. He has often told me that he composed this<sup>27</sup> song one day when his wife had been fretting o'er their misfortunes.

Here, Lapraik is presented (as indeed he seems to have been) as the innocent victim of greed and mismanagement. It is also significant

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., "On the Distressed Condition of Honest Farmers", 11.3-6.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 178-79.

<sup>27</sup>In Notes on Scottish Song By Robert Burns, ed. J.C. Dick (London: H. Frowde, 1908), p.42.

that Burns responds to the circumstances which surrounded the poem - it was written to relieve despair and cheer by touching the heart. These two elements, Lapraik's character as man and poet, and the affective power of poetry, are the main concerns of this first epistle to the "true, genuine, Scottish Bard".<sup>28</sup>

Burns wrote to Lapraik to establish friendly contact with a local poet. Lapraik's poetry and personality were the stimuli which released his poetic energies, encouraging him to express and communicate in the self-dramatizing, self-revealing epistolary form certain basic ideas for living which, he knew, would find a sympathetic response. Before he could write great and distinctive epistolary poetry Burns needed to know his correspondent intimately. He need not have met him, but before he could write with the ease and confidence that is characteristic of his best work he had to have some indication of the man's character and opinions. This explains why his Mauchline epistles are so superior to those written in Edinburgh and Dumfries. Burns's Ayrshire correspondents were chosen deliberately as sounding-boards or as a sympathetic audience, to whom he could write developing his many sided personality, testing ideas, or seeking new recruits in his struggle for freedom. In Edinburgh and Dumfries, he was, at first, a stranger with few acquaintances who shared his background or experience. He lived in those communities, but he was not of them. The situation was akin to that which he describes when writing to Thomson of his methods of lyric composition:

Laddie, lie near me -- must lie by me, for some time -- I do not know the air; & untill I am compleat master of a <sup>29</sup>tune, in my own singing, (such as it is) I never can compose for it -

<sup>28</sup>From the title of the poem in Burns's first Commonplace Book. See Robert Burns's Commonplace Book 1783-1785, eds. J. C. Ewing and Davidson Cook (Glasgow: Gowans and Gray, 1938), p.26.

<sup>29</sup>F., II, 200.

In epistolary composition, he needed to have mastered his correspondent's personality and needed to feel certain of the reception his poem would receive before he could compose confidently.

In the first four stanzas Burns's tone is anecdotal, recollective, and appropriately respectful as he specifies the occasion on which he heard Lapraik's song. He reveals his rural background in the opening stanza, where his keen eye for the movement of the hare, expressed in "whiddan" shows him to be a knowledgeable countryman. In these lines also, he implies something about his conception of poetry and its value which he will later make explicit. A similar restraint informs the paradoxical phrase "unknown frien'", the implications of which remain undeveloped until stanza four.

Burns's recollection of the occasion on which he heard Lapraik's song becomes more precise with each stanza until, in stanza three, he specifies the two qualities which so impressed him -- its power to touch the heart and the fitness with which it expressed male tenderness. "What gen'rous manly bosoms feel" is one of Burns's main concerns in the poem, and an air of frank masculinity pervades the epistle. From line 85 onwards, there is a concentration on exclusively male companionship, convivial drinking, and swapping of rhymes. Lines 97-102, indeed, reflect Burns in his "Tom Jones" mood, but Fielding's hero is not the only fictional character to appear in the epistle. With "gen'rous manly bosoms", we are confronted with a more sentimental type such as Sterne's traveller, or Henry Mackenzie's Harley.

The combination in one poem of two such different views of masculinity is no less curious than, at first sight, Burns's comparison of Pope and Lapraik in stanza four, where poets of the English tradition are introduced to flatter Lapraik for his achievement in the lyric. The shock of juxtaposition in "... odd kind chiel/About

Muirkirk" with "... Pope, or Steele, / Or Beattie's wark" is not bathetic, but deliberately designed to reflect Burns's surprise on discovering one so talented so close to him. Moreover, in the last two lines of this stanza Burns is striving to recreate precisely the actual occasion on which he heard the song. On his visit to a strange house for the "rockin" he hears a song known to others in the company, but which he does not recognize. Who is the composer? It is so good, it must surely be the work of Steele, or Pope, or Beattie. Is it, he asks, only to be told by those familiar with it (who are shocked that anyone could be so ignorant) that it is the work of Lapraik who lives "About Muirkirk". Burns achieves this re-creation of the scene by his careful construction of the "Standart Habby" stanza. Lines 21 and 22 are punctuated by short, breathless pauses to capture Burns's growing excitement. Then comes the matter-of-fact reply, after the dead-stop of the semi-colon; "No fear! It's by someone living here in Muirkirk, and none of your fancy Englishmen!"

The idea that there is, in Ayrshire, considerable local talent requiring only to be prompted into expression is one of Burns's firmest beliefs. Lapraik's significance is that he is the living proof. In discovering him, Burns has discovered not only another talented poet to whom he can write but, equally important, a friend who shares certain views with him. This is the meaning of the phrase, "unknown frien'!" Lapraik's poetry is a key to his personality, and Burns writes his epistle with confidence because the song could not lie.

Tactfully, Lapraik is described in the third person in stanzas five and six. This enables Burns to preserve the personal, anecdotal narrative and, at the same time, allows him to praise Lapraik without servility since he is merely repeating expressed opinion. Throughout the opening stanzas, Burns has been charting his rising

excitement. He hears the song and is delighted. He is even more pleased when he discovers that it was written by a local man, and when he hears reports of his other talents he is overjoyed. This anticipation of pleasure is well caught in stanza six. There, the syntax of the opening line challenges Burns to prove the truth of the reported speech of lines 29 and 30. The effect is of a small group of insiders saying to an incredulous stranger who can't quite believe his luck, "Go on! Just you try it. Set him down to a pint of ale, and you'll soon see that we're right." This reveals Burns's shrewd perception of the local situation with its rivalries and jealousies, and he succeeds in reproducing it by control over the impression of speech - here, reported speech.

The prospect of their meeting forms a suitable climax to this part of the poem. Burns, therefore, makes stanza seven especially vivid and immediate. He erupts into the opening, jumping up and vowing his determination to meet this man of whom he has heard so much:

Tho' I should pawn my pleugh an' graith,  
Or die a cadger pownie's death,  
At some dyke-back,  
A pint an' gill I'd gie them baith,  
To hear your crack. (11.38-42)

The oath is important because, although exaggerated, it is not fanciful. The introduction of an element of reality at this point helps to underline his fixed intention to meet Lapraik, while also prefiguring a reckless side to Burns's character which will be given more play as the poem develops. As the impulsiveness of his action in jumping up and unashamedly declaring his liking for Lapraik foreshadows the theme of the next few stanzas on the value of spontaneity in composition, so too does the union of alcohol, companionship, and talk prefigure the extended celebration of friendship from line 85 onwards.

Having described what has attracted him to Lapraik, Burns

now introduces himself, as a poet first, significantly. He selects details, but with the phrase, "But first an' foremost, I should tell", professes scrupulous honesty. This is neither contradictory nor hypocritical. Burns was never an "integrated" personality, but chose to present highly-developed portraits of certain aspects of his life which were in themselves true without being complete. The choice of detail was made to accord with his correspondent's character, but Burns did not, in his greatest epistles, falsify the image to suit his correspondent. Instead, his self-absorption is an example of intellectual curiosity and artistic endeavour, like Rembrandt's long series of self-portraits. None presents the complete man, but each has an artistic integrity.

The direct address of line 43 is continued in the comic exaggeration of "Amaist as soon as I could spell, / I to the crambo-jingle fell", a piece of excusable licence in this humorous epistolary exchange. The sense of direct address is continued and the self-portrait enriched in ll. 49-54. Here, Burns deliberately minimizes his poetic skill for rhetorical effect. He tosses down an outrageous challenge to provoke his critics. Like a cocky boxer, he offers his chin to his opponent as a way of accentuating the critics' inability to harm him. Before they can retaliate, Burns pre-empts the attack of the "Critic-folk" by anticipating their objections in a stanza which mimics their affected, "snooty" language:

Your Critic-folk may cock their nose,  
 And say, 'How can you e'er propose,  
 'You wha ken hardly verse frae prose,  
   'To mak a sang?'  (11. 55-58)

"Your Critic-folk" recalls Alf Garnett's "yer actual Queen". Such familiarity is devastating. It drags down the august to the speaker's grubby level. The question of ll. 56-58 captures the professional's affectation of disdain as he regards the mere amateur. Burns? A



poet? Never! How can one so ignorant, so untutored even contemplate composition? Burns's reply comes at the end of stanza where, with exaggerated politeness he registers his alternative view:

But by your leaves, my learned foes,  
Ye're maybe wrang. (ll. 59-60)

Burns has given us humorous parody, but these two lines raise more serious questions. The contemptuous irony of "learned foes" is the starting point for his biting dissection of an attitude of mind, and in the next two stanzas, he lays bare the "Critic-folk" with a savagery worthy of Pope at his most witheringly precise. To them, poetry consists in learning rules and applying them, but Burns rejects their "jargon", their "Latin names for horns an' stools". Poetry, for him, cannot be reduced to a formula, nor is it a mechanical process. However, the significance of Burns's attack is not confined to poetry. These stanzas have the same buzzing anger as the narrative section of the epistle to Rankine (K47) where, in similar fashion, Burns attacked as wrong-headed the belief that something as complex as human relations or morality could be reduced to a set of rules enforceable by Church authority. Here, too, Burns extends the scope of his attack. The attitude to poetry which he outlines in ll. 55-60 reveals something about the nature of society and the importance of social status.

Lines 63-66 express his resentment of the way in which position and status can protect "fools" who have no merit or talent but deserve only to take up "spades and shools". Instead, their foolish sons "Confuse their brains in Colledge-classes". They enter foolish, and leave in no way improved except that, having learned what the "Grammars" have to tell them, "... they think to climb Parnassus/ By dint o' Greek". The very explicitness of the verb "climb" mocks the effort which they must spend in composition, compared to Burns's case:

Whene'er my Muse does on me glance,  
I jingle at her. (ll. 53-54)

It is not an individual's merit which is the criterion of respect or status. As a high social standing works in favour of those who are without merit to protect them from the fate they deserve so, too, familiarity with a set of unnatural and essentially false rules ensures that poetry written in accordance with them will receive acclaim out of all proportion to its true worth. Burns gives this as a maxim, a rule of life. In doing so, he reveals the revolutionary nature of his epistolary verse. What seems like an innocent epistle on poetry is, in fact, a critique of society with important consequences.

His technical achievement in ll. 61-72 is considerable. The jarringly familiar repetition of "your" in ll. 61, 62 is used to mark off the critics' attitude from Burns's own. In the same stanza, the interrogatives "What's a' ..." and "What sairs ..." pose challenging questions and answer them in the same breath. The hissing consonantal sounds in line 65 capture Burns's disgust, as he seems to spit to rid his mouth of the bad taste left there by the mere mention of the critics' terminology. His anger finds satisfying expression in the thick, slow vowels of "A set o' dull, conceited Hashes" and the verb "confuse" (l. 68) conjures up the image of bewildered, touchy dullards. "Plain truth to speak" is Burns's watchword in this central section. Like a fearless investigator, he strips away layers of obfuscation to reveal the Emperor shivering pitifully in his new clothes. In the same stanza, Burns mocks his foes by comparing their heavy-spirited nature with those slow beasts of burden, the bullock and the ass, thus stressing that "Colledge-classes" will make no impression on their impenetrable dullness. This reflection prompts the amazed tone of ll. 71, 72 where the voice inevitably

rises to a stratospheric height of incredulity to express just indignation.

Burns's reply is given in ll. 73-78 where he raises to the level of rhetorical statement what was, in ll. 49-54, a mere admission by one poet to another. "Nature's fire" is the only source of wisdom for the poet. "Learning", which Burns accents ironically in line 74, is something to be found in books. "Wisdom", by contrast, is the gift of "honest Nature", teacher and bestower of talents. The distinction recalls Pope's contrast between innate connoisseurship which can appreciate things of beauty without owning them and the philistinism which merely amasses and acquires on a more lavish scale than anyone else. Burns's desire is that his "... Muse, tho' hamely in attire,/ May touch the heart". This ideal can never be attained by those who have neither poetic talent nor real experience of life's variety but who rely on "Grammars" and artificial rules in poetry and life. However, the man who has "ae spark o' Nature's fire" possesses the ability, like Nature itself, to convey an unaffected truth with direct appeal. He can strike a responsive chord in others because the unrestrained expression of the heart's impulsive emotions is genuine and true to life, and so gains the acceptance accorded to truths of common experience.

With this view of poetry, we can now see an added significance in the first four lines of the poem where the fresh, natural quality of oncoming Spring is no mere image but a symbol of the sort of poetry Burns wants. Similarly, we can realise how forceful was the appeal of Lapraik's song which "... thirl'd the heart-strings thro' the breast,/ A' to the life", and thus satisfied the crucial criterion of excellence in poetry -- it expressed a common sentiment in a sincere, affecting manner. For this, Lapraik is placed beside Ramsay and Fergusson in stanza fourteen. The three are linked

not by their skill in the vernacular, but because they are native Scots poets who have demonstrated their genius for touching the heart, for giving voice to the truths of shared experience in a way that strikes home by virtue of its sincerity. Lines 79-84 form the climax to the second part of the poem and, since Burns has given his view of poetry and thus revealed his personality, he now offers his friendship.

As there are true and false poets, so there are kinds of friendship. Burns presents himself as "ae friend that's true" and with this, the tone of male friendship becomes dominant. The modulation to this new section is naturally handled; the tone becomes gradually more expansive and confiding, as is only suitable after he has laid his poetic soul bare. The modesty of "I winna blaw about mysel" is something of a convention in the epistle-form, but it becomes convincing by the way in which Burns gives his character in the living speech of ll. 91-96. These lines, 91-104, are masterly in their control over phrasing and syntax, and present, through voice alone, an intimate portrait of a complex personality. Lines 95 and 96 are rueful and self-contradictory. In lines 97 and 98, he adopts a finger-to-the-lips, confessional air, ironically wondering at his folly, only to dispel this by the sly reference to fornication in "Maybe some ither thing they gie me/ They weel can spare". This suits the masculine tone of the latter part of the epistle, and recollects for the older man a memory of the joys of youth.

Both men now know each other, and the next inevitable step is a meeting. "I should be proud to meet you there" is no mere polite formula, but expresses the younger poet's genuine desire to meet a man much his senior who had suffered much yet shown through it all the kind of fortitude which Burns admired, and had still retained his humour and his devotion to poetry. Perhaps Burns also thought that he would be making contact with the last surviving member of a tradition

of Scots poetry which had succeeded in touching the heart. The Anglified diction of "We'se gie ae night's discharge to care" (l. 105) stresses the intent (or, rather, determination) to defy the worries of the world and obtain that cathartic release which poetry, companionship, and alcohol could give. The one conjures up the others because each has the ability to liberate the spirit and unite mankind. In the rollicking rhythms of ll. 109-14 in celebration of conviviality, everything is clearly visualized and clearly heard, from the steam rising from water for the toddy to the crash of pewter measures on the table:

The four-gill chap, we'se gar him clatter,  
An' kirs'n him wi' reekin water; (ll. 109-10)

Significantly, the plural of the pronoun throughout this stanza envisages Lapraik's willing involvement.

The vivid anticipation of enjoyment which such particularity of vision brings also seems to raise in Burns's mind an intense anger against those who oppose such pleasures. It is as if such resentment always lurked in his mind that, before it could surface, Burns had to be at the peak of enjoyment, actual or envisaged, at which point this gloomy spectre would materialize only to be put firmly in its place. The movement of the best epistles charts Burns's emotions as they develop within the poem. The logic of his poetry is that of the heart, not of the mind, and ll. 115-20 form yet another pre-emptive at his opponents whose potential objections and criticisms he was always alert to. He therefore veers off from celebration to attack in order to chase away such evil spectres and nip them in the bud.

The spectral figure which rises in Burns's imagination at the very mention of unrestrained fun is that of a man whose life is governed by the obsessive pursuit of wealth. He is pilloried for his selfish concern with material goods, since these are destructive

of friendship, of love, of natural human relations -- of all the social ties which bind men together. The climax of the criticism, the damning "catch-the-plack", is the result of the long, insulting build-up achieved by run-on lines in ll. 116 and 117. It is not fanciful to see Lapraik, ruined by men who acted thus, finding these lines especially relevant, and therefore responding sympathetically to the sentiments of the following stanza. In this finely-constructed English verse, Burns gives the positive statement which rids the poem of the bad taste left by the "selfish, warly race". He advocates mutual aid, benevolence, and social coherence in terms which, while recalling Masonic ideals, also reflect the Augustan ideals which informed Lapraik's song.

The poem ends on a cocky, cheerful note, with a reminiscence of the work of earlier "old, Scotch Bard[s]", Hamilton of Gilbertfield and Allan Ramsay, whose epistolary exchange is deliberately echoed.<sup>30</sup> This recollection of the Scots epistolary tradition is intended to provide a context of historical continuity for the spirit of this poem in which Burns champions friendship and poetry as two of life's positive values. Each is of importance in living and, in Burns's eyes, the two are inextricably linked. Friendship and good-fellowship go hand-in-hand with conviviality and the swapping of rhymes. However, poetry and the true poetic spirit is something more significant. It is, in this poem, a metaphor for an attitude to life itself. Burns's definition of it here is the forerunner of his examination of the choices in life open to men such as Lapraik and himself in the epistle which follows.

Burns's second verse-letter to Lapraik was written in reply to an epistle which Lapraik had sent him and which is now lost. This

<sup>30</sup>Burns recalls the opening lines of Hamilton's second epistle to Ramsay. See Ramsay STS, I, 121, ll. 1-4.

is unfortunate since we cannot now know how far the development of Burns's epistle was determined by the contents of Lapraik's poem. However, one epistle which Lapraik addressed to Burns, though [written] at a later date, gives some idea of the effect which Burns's correspondence had on the older man:<sup>31</sup>

When sitting lanely by myself,  
Just unco griev'd and wae,  
To think that Fortune, fickle Joe!  
Had kick'd me o'er the brae!

.....

Till your kind Muse, wi' friendly blast,  
First tooted up my fame,  
And sounded loud, through a' the Wast,  
My lang forgotten name.

Quoth I, "Shall I, like to a sumph,  
"Sit douff and dowie here,  
"And suffer the ill-natur'd warld  
"To ca' RAB BURNS a liar. (ll. 9-12 and 33-40)

This was what Burns intended. Not only that Lapraik should be urged to write poetry and so add to the fame of Ayrshire (a subject close to Burns's heart at this point in 1785 as his next epistle to William Simson makes clear), but also that he should cultivate that attitude to life, the poetic spirit, which is the central theme of this epistle. Here, Burns examines the lot of men like Lapraik and himself and contrasts their opportunities in life with other, more prestigious occupations. His conclusion is that their values, as represented by the poet, are infinitely superior to those typified by such representative figures as the merchant or the Baillie. But, it is not merely the poet who is presented as the example. It is, significantly, Burns the poet. He offers his actions, his behaviour, -- himself, as the symbol of the values he urges and as an example of the struggle to be waged. Like the leader of a band of guerillas, he tells his history and shows the

<sup>31</sup>From Lapraik's "Epistle to R\*\*\*\*T B\*\*\*S, in his Poems, On Several Occasions (Kilmarnock: 1788), pp. 35-41. Throughout, Lapraik echoes the ideas and the very phrases of Burns's epistles.

scars of battle. In this way, he raises morale, boosts the confidence of the newly-enlisted and proves, by his very presence, that the cause in which he fights has God on its side. "After all", Burns says, "I've survived".

In no other epistle do we sense that Burns is so immediately before us. This is quite deliberate, for one of the many contrasts which create the tension of the poem is that between spontaneity and calculation, between the impulsiveness of the poet's emotion and the way in which the mercantile spirit doles out its approval or disapproval according to its assessment of the profit to be gained from the bestowal of a wintry smile. Burns seems to be only one step ahead of us as we read. He sought to give the impression of writing the epistle as we watch, for that was proof that what we read is genuine and unaffected, the promptings of his heart transferred to paper as they rise.

The graphic image of the farm which opens the epistle reveals Burns weary from sowing, but determined to take the time to repay a debt of friendship. The introduction of financial imagery with "debtor" is deliberate. Lapraik, ruined in the Ayr Bank scandal, would no doubt smile ruefully at the idea of his being owed anything, but Burns also uses the term to make the contrast between this kind of debt of friendship (which ought always to be honoured), and those financial transactions, alluded to in ll. 79-84, which corrupt and even deny the possibility of friendship. He describes, in frank detail, all the drudgery of farm life which Lapraik the farmer would recognize for he wishes his advice about the cathartic value of composition to have the force of a real solution, arrived at in the real world. It must be seen as no mere poetic cliché, but as a claim which his experience had substantiated. The slow movement of the



stanza reflects the drudgery and also plays its part in the larger structure of the epistle. The claim which Burns will make for the re-animating power of poetry is verified by the increasing tempo of the poem which, from this lethargic opening, speeds up to the dazzling rapidity of stanza six where, refreshed, he begins to compose.

The argument with the Muse is conventional but Burns uses it for quite specific ends. She is presented, firstly, as part of that conspiracy which tries to prevent him repaying his debt to Lapraik. However, the tussle with the Muse also allows him to distance, tactfully, his praise of the older poet and permits the introduction of set-piece dialogue which varies the pattern of the verse, cutting across Burns's narrative to give the effect of a dramatic interlude. This epistle combines much of the best of Burns's inheritance from English and Scottish traditions. There is the moral conviction of Augustan epistolary poetry, the belief in the necessity of poetry and poets as exemplified by Ramsay in his verse and action, and, not least, the superb technical skill of Fergusson. The latter is particularly evident, and especially in these stanzas which introduce the whining, resentful Muse and describe Burns's disagreement with her. The expressive neologisms of "The tapetless, ramfeezl'd hizzie" (l.13) concentrate his dislike, but he allows the complaining figure to reveal her own character in direct speech which, by careful placing of the pauses, reads like the true voice of a lazy, nebbly woman:

... 'Ye ken we've been sae busy  
       'This month an' mair,  
       'That trowth, my head is grown right dizzie,  
       'An' something sair.' (ll. 15-18)

This skill in construction and in poetic technique is apparent throughout and is to be explained by Burns's understanding that he was writing for an audience who would read his poetry closely and would be alert to its many nuances. For example, the image of Burns,

the stern moralist, urging the Muse to obey her conscience is deliberately exaggerated for the sake of incongruity. Lapraik's knowledge of Burns's character as revealed in the first epistle meant that he would see the humour in this contradictory role, quite out of keeping with his character, which Burns adopts temporarily. Yet, the determination to write is genuine, and he makes this plain by acting out the business of composition before our eyes. The effect of stanza six is complex. We know, of course, that Burns has written the epistle so far but, having been drawn closer to the poet as he narrows the physical scope of the poem, we now willingly succumb to the illusion he creates of being at his shoulder, looking on, as he converts his vow to write into action. His resolve contrasts with the Muse's lackadaisical spirit, and the determined energy and immediacy of this stanza is his challenging response to all those forces trying to stop his writing to Lapraik:

Sae I gat paper in a blink,  
 An' down gaed stumple in the ink;  
 Quoth I, 'Before I sleep a wink,  
       'I vow I'll close it;  
 'An' if ye winna mak it clink,  
       'By Jove I'll prose it!'                               (11. 31-36)

One can see and hear the splash of the pen as it is thrust into the bottle because Burns has so constructed the poem to bring himself before us as living proof of the efficacy of his philosophy of cathartic and restorative composition. This is the first climax of the poem. He has honoured his debt to Lapraik by beginning (or so it seems, although the poem is already thirty lines old) to write; he has entertained and encouraged his correspondent and has, with some conviction, presented himself as proof of the values he advocates.

In the next four stanzas Burns is not concerned, as he was in the first epistle, to define the true poetic spirit. Instead, he urges on Lapraik the importance of that outlook on life as a valid

response to the misfortunes which men in their situation must inevitably encounter. We should not doubt the serious intention behind this section, although Burns professes to be scribbling down "... some blether/ Just clean aff-loof". That cavalier tone merely reflects the spontaneity of his advice and, therefore, its genuineness and lack of calculation. His growing isolation in Mauchline society, which he found increasingly stifling and inimical, convinced him that his role was that of an Opposition. His epistles are his Parliamentary chamber, for there, like the leader of a minority party, he attacks, castigates, and theorizes, proposing solutions and visualizing New Jerusalems if only his ideas are accepted. Unlike most Parliamentary oppositions, however, he can justify his claims. His proof? Simply, his actions in the village, his existence as an alternative, his very survival. The advice of ll. 43-48 is confident and skilfully expressed but it gains enormously from the two stanzas which follow. In ll. 49-54, Burns can look to a future for himself and this alone is sufficient to justify his defiant dismissal of capricious and malevolent Fortune in "Ne'er mind how Fortune waft an' warp;/ She's but a b-tch." (ll. 47-48) Like Lapraik and others in their situation, he has been buffeted by Fate, but his response is a determination to enjoy laughter, song, and dance, all of which suggest activity and sociability. The infectious confidence of stanza nine balances the more rhetorical and considered statement of ll. 73ff. Its informality may mask the serious intent, but Burns knows that this throwaway tone is appropriate as he addresses Lapraik directly.

Fate, however, is always ready to deal an awkward blow, as the hint of dogged persistence in "Still persecuted by the limmer/ Frae year to year" suggests. Yet, by recalling the inevitability with which the seasons return, the first two lines of stanza ten allow Burns to link himself with all the energy and potential fecundity of

Spring and also to suggest that his survival has a similar inevitability. "I, Rob, am here" crowns his persuasive argument. Despite everything, he has survived and, therefore, triumphed. Personal experience gives this epistle its passionate force. The conviction that his fate at the hands of society is of importance as a measure of that society's well-being rings throughout this and his other epistles from this period. Mauchline was Burns's battle-ground. There, his opponents were clearly visible as was his opposition to them. His existence constituted a threat to the established authority of the Kirk and to the douce sensibilities of the conservative villagers. His life in Mauchline was one long test-case. If he survived, he had not only won a victory for himself, but had enlarged the scope for freedom of all who wished to disagree with or dissociate themselves from the dominant orthodoxy. That is the significance of "I, Rob, am here", and that is the combative, visionary spirit which informs these Mauchline epistles. Burns has stepped out of the poem and spoken directly to Lapraik and all who read the epistle. Now, the poem becomes more of a dramatic monologue which builds to a heightened climax. Lapraik is still addressed, but the following stanzas have all the restless self-questioning and daring speculation of a man testing his philosophy aloud and finding it triumphantly intact.

It is typical of the antithetical quality of Burns's mind that, when he is most physically present as a positive force, the spectral, negative forces begin to crowd round. So far, Burns has presented only his philosophy. Now, to demonstrate to all its validity, he offers what might, at first sight, appear to be alternatives but which, on closer examination, prove to be insubstantial, mere treasures upon earth. Ought we to envy the "city-gent", the "Baillie", or "the paughty, feudal Thane", all symbols of worldly success, figures to whom respect is due? Burns's answer is in two

parts -- the affirmation of ll. 73ff., and the damning manner in which he poses the questions. The phrasing and construction of stanzas eleven and twelve demand a negative answer to each question as it is posed. The tawdry, modish abbreviation of "city-gent" reveals Burns's contempt for the breed, while "lie an' sklent" captures the shifty, greedy glance of the merchant who has his eye on the main chance and nothing else. The same precision lays bare the Baillie. The swelling self-importance which accompanies wealth is well caught in "... big wi' cent per cent", and it also conveys the man's overweening pride. He considers such wealth to be a natural growth, for the association of 'big wi' ' and "muckle wame" makes an implicit comparison between his bulk, puffed with pride and good living, and that of the pregnant woman. However, the sneer of "some bit Brugh" pricks this pursy balloon; it suggests an area of influence and power which is positively Lilliputian. In stanza twelve, the respect which the externals of dress and manner demand is withheld. Instead, with the folk-phrase, "nae sheep-shank bane", Burns dismisses the haughty lord and the notion that his "ruffl'd sark an' glancin cane" should be envied.

He completes his rejection of their value-system in the apostrophe of ll. 73-78. There, he makes a plea for the individual spirit and for the indomitability of each man who has a capacity for self-reliance, independence, and natural talent. Given these, one needs nothing else -- neither wealth nor position. Without the latter, the respect one meets must be genuine, the friendships, sincere. Why flatter a man who can bestow nothing but friendship in return? This reflection is the base on which Burns builds to his climax. The emotional pulse of the poem, like the manner of address, has fluctuated with the ebb and flow of Burns's anger. Now, however, he progresses steadily to a final statement which, like Dante's Divine Comedy, reaches upwards to the light.

Burns offers a set of values, different from those which have brought conventional respect to the "city-gent", but which are truer and, ultimately, more socially responsible. They are best exemplified in "The social, friendly, honest man" (l. 87) and "The followers o' the ragged Nine" (l. 92). The former are at one with the Christian view of the world as a universal brotherhood and the latter resemble those "blessed fools" who, by their refusal to take thought for the morrow, escape the curse of inhumanity in their personal relationships -- a curse which Burns believes is necessarily visited on those wheeler-dealers and calculating social climbers. For them, thought for the morrow is thought for themselves. Burns has seen a saner, better world which he tries to describe in this final section. Its moral norms are very different from those which prevail in the world of the Baillie and the trader.

The contrast between their world that which Burns envisages is concentrated in the word "state" (l. 79) where he deliberately exploits its ambiguity of meaning. The word could have two interpretations -- "condition", or "organized society". If the former, then ll. 78-80 mean that man's natural state is to be "rich an' great" and that those who are not are doomed:

Damnation then would be our fate,  
Beyond remead; (ll. 81-82)

This convenient perversion of Christian teaching would suit the "sordid sons o' Mammon's line" admirably. Alternatively, the postulation, "Were this the charter of our state,/ On pain o' hell be rich an' great", invites the thought that this is, in fact, the sort of society in which we live and, to the rich and powerful, we are damned. Our poverty marks us as outcasts from society as they understand it. Such packing of meaning into a small space is not a skill usually associated with Burns or with "Standart Habby." The reason for this is that the verse

flows with such ease in the hands of a master that one assumes one is listening to witty conversation and nothing more. One can miss the intellectual meat behind the shiny shell.

Burns and Lapraik choose to live by another set of rules which have a greater sanction than any man-made "charter". Their "creed" is based on the "royal Mandate" and is of greater antiquity. It is relevant in any society and to every man who will recognize it. Three great Burnsian positives are celebrated in 11. 85-90: friendship, honesty of heart, and a common humanity. The poem has been building to this definitive statement of the values he cherishes, and they are expressed in terms of religious conviction. The language of the stanza is simple, the tone elevated, the commitment, total. All-inclusive phrases such as "Whate'er he be" and "none but he" are used to reflect the democratic appeal. On this basis, Burns and Lapraik can accept their condition without succumbing or flinching. Song, dance, and laughter are innocent pursuits and fruitful sources of happiness. Their very "thoughtlessness" holds out hope of a joy which the "sordid sons o' Mammon's line" can never know. Their inhumanity is revealed as Burns compares them to some frenetically grubbing animal. They "scrape, an' squeeze, an' growl" to prosper at the expense of others in a cut-throat world, only to meet with due reward after death:

Their worthless nievefu' of a soul,  
 May in some future carcass howl,  
                                   The forest's fright;  
 Or in some day-detesting owl  
                                   May shun the light.                                   (11. 98-102)

For Burns and Lapraik, the prospect is very different. The vision of their paradisaical existence cannot compare with Dante's contemplation of ineffable light, nor should it in an epistle to a friend. There is, nevertheless, a similar strength of conviction behind Burns's less majestic, more personal vision:

Then may L\*\*\*\*\*K and B\*\*\*\* arise,  
 To reach their native, kindred skies,  
 And sing their pleasures, hopes an' joys,  
                                   In some mild sphere,  
 Still closer knit in friendship's ties  
                                   Each passing year!           (11. 103-108)

The movement is upwards towards friendship and song, for the poetic spirit, Burns's antidote to the poisonous morality of "catch-the-plack", is the ultimate positive force. His wish to correspond with and contact other poets in the neighbourhood of Mauchline was not simply a desire to encourage verse in his native Ayrshire though, as the epistle to Simson shows, that was one important element in the correspondence. There was, in addition, a belief that he was joining forces with members of an underground force, an alternative society, where the simple, unspoiled truths of fraternity and honesty of heart found their natural outlet in composition. Such correspondence, when reciprocated, was a source of strength to him in his artistic and social isolation, but it also formed part of his struggle against the dominant, stifling social and cultural ethos in which he lived.

William Simson, the recipient of Burns's next verse-epistle, had been educated for the Church in Glasgow but became schoolmaster at Ochiltree, near Mauchline. Tradition has it that he wrote to Burns, after reading "The Holy Tulzie" and that his epistle prompted this reply. Whatever the truth of this, there is no doubt that Burns regarded Simson as a congenial rhymester with a keen interest in local affairs and a taste for religious satire. In his reply, therefore, Burns takes the opportunity to expound his ideas on the need for a flourishing poetry in Ayrshire to one who has shown himself, by his epistle, to be one of the craft. However, Burns's poem is more considered and less spontaneous than others written at this time. This I would suggest, is because there did not exist between the two men the same intimacy or knowledge of shared experience as there was be-



tween Burns and Sillar, or Rankine, or Lapraik. There may also be another reason. If we accept that Simson wrote in praise of "The Holy Tulzie", we must consider how Burns would have responded in the Mauchline of 1785. He was, then, considerably more than an annoyance to the Kirk's authority and to Mauchline's Establishment. Although he was not so completely isolated as in the Spring and Summer of 1786, yet especially after the circulation of "Holy Willie's Prayer", he could not afford to flaunt his authorship of such telling religious satires. His own account confirms this:<sup>32</sup>

The first of my poetic offspring that saw the light was a burlesque lamentation on a quarrel between two revd. Calvinists "The Holy Tulzie" ... I had an idea myself that the piece had some merit; but to prevent the worst, I gave a copy of it to a friend who was very fond of these things, and told him I could not guess who was the Author of it, ... With a certain side of both clergy and laity it met with a roar of applause. -- Holy Willie's Prayer next made its appearance, and alarmed the Kirk-Session so much that they held three several meetings to look over their holy artillery, if any of it was pointed against profane Rhymers.

Although Burns deliberately tampers with the chronology of this autobiographical letter for literary effect, it seems clear that, in the Spring of 1785, Burns would have been wary of replying unguardedly to a man of whom he knew little and who had written to him praising a controversial poem. Of such stuff are "agents provocateurs" made! Thus, the epistle concentrates on the less openly controversial matter of the condition of poetry in Ayrshire, and the "Postscript" (which is quite distinct from the epistle and is, in fact, an enclosure rather than a postscript) is equally free from controversy. It is impossible to know now if Burns sent either letter or "Postscript" to Simson, as there is no text earlier than that in the Kilmarnock edition. It is certainly possible that, of the two, the "Postscript" was written for the 1786 edition which, as it included only one other religious satire

<sup>32</sup>This is taken from Burns's long autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore, F., I, 114.

("The Holy Fair") apart from the "Postscript", would hardly have given, without it, an accurate picture of the Burns whom many subscribers knew. The "Postscript" reveals a certain impatience with the details of factional religious debate, as if, when poets foregathered, it was too insignificant a subject to discuss. Poetry was their proper concern and if, like Burns and Simson, they were from Kyle, then the poetry of their native region should engage their attention, as it does in this epistle.

Burns's uncertainty about his correspondent's motive and his ignorance of his personality are revealed in the wary, half-humorous, half-reproachful opening stanzas. Likewise, Burns's manipulation of the syntax in stanza two captures his disquiet as fear of mockery contends and conflicts with his desire to believe Simson's flattery which seems to have compared Burns with Ramsay and Fergusson, thus giving him an honoured place in an illustrious tradition. On reading this, Burns records that he felt exactly as the young husband does before the custom of "creeling"; satisfaction mingled with apprehension. This emotional confusion is caught in the tentative phrasing of ll. 14-18 where he measures himself, with some modesty, against the towering figures who had preceded him:

Should I but dare a hope to speel,  
 Wi' Allan, or wi' Gilbertfield,  
                                   The braes o' fame;  
 Or Ferguson, the writer-chiel,  
                                   A deathless name.                   (11. 14-18)

Fergusson's fate is the spark which fires Burns's anger and it blazes forth in the bitter apostrophe to his genius. He has compared his situation to that of Fergusson in Edinburgh and has found points of contact to strengthen his resolve. Each had to write in uncongenial and unsympathetic surroundings and each felt frustrated by neglect and hostility. Burns sees in Fergusson a symbol of unrewarded merit but the comparison has wider implications. He suggests that since Fergusson's struggles in Edinburgh were thwarted by an un-

sympathetic "Gentry", Kyle's poets must avoid this fate by uniting to " ... gar our streams an' burnies shine/ Up wi' the best". There is also an implicit contrast between the image of Fergusson's talent choking in the dry, dusty atmosphere of Edinburgh and the opportunities which exist for Burns and others in the green Ayrshire landscape where the Muse may flourish. Although this outburst of sympathetic exasperation contributes much to the emotional development of the poem, it appears intrusive and masks the linear development from stanza three to five. In the former, Burns had rejected the possibility of his ever equalling the achievements of Ramsay and Fergusson; in the latter, he decides, nevertheless, to continue writing because it is a pleasurable activity. "It gies me ease" (l.30) is the kind of phrase which, to a correspondent whom he knew better, Burns would have elaborated, for it encapsulates one important function of poetry -- namely, its power to dispel melancholy and bring relief. However, in this epistle he exercises a restraint foreign to his nature and to the conventions of the vernacular verse-epistle. The poem has three themes which Burns considered important: the value of personal expression in verse, patriotism, and the contrast between Nature and the practices of the money-grubbing herd. He makes little of them however, since he could not be certain of a sympathetic response or a reciprocal interest. "It gies me ease" will be fully treated only in the epistle to Smith (K79).

Burns's "rustic reed" introduces the mythological COILA and the question of poetry in Ayrshire which concerns Burns in his roles of moralist, social historian, and poet. In his epistles to Lapraik, he urged the need for poetry as symbolic of an alternative value-system, or as the means to personal salvation. Here, less controversially, he concentrates on the opportunities for the poet in Kyle and the duty which he has to maintain, albeit in different form,

the tradition of freedom there. However, stanzas six to ten are not among Burns's best although the subject is one which preoccupied him, as an entry in his First Commonplace Book reveals:

... I am hurt to see other places of Scotland, their towns, rivers, woods, haughs, &c. immortalized in ... celebrated performances, whilst my dear native country ... famous both in ancient and modern times for a gallant, and warlike race of inhabitants; a country where civil, & particularly religious Liberty have ever found their first support, & their last asylum; a country, the birthplace of many famous Philosophers, Soldiers, & Statesmen, and the scene of many important events recorded in Scottish History, particularly a great many of the actions of the GLORIOUS WALLACE, the Saviour of his Country; Yet, we have never had one Scotch Poet of any eminence, to make the fertile banks of Irvine ... emulate Tay ... Tweed, &c. this is a complaint I would gladly remedy ...<sup>32</sup>

The intention behind the prose and poetic statements is clear. Burns seeks the support of others in re-animating the craft of poetry in his region of Ayrshire because poetry can fix memorably the heroes and natural beauties of Kyle, as Ramsay and Fergusson had done for their regions. In addition, the poet in Kyle can become a latter-day Wallace. By his verse and actions he can be a creative, liberating force, setting free men's minds and hearts and uniting them by his vision. However, the execution of these stanzas never matches the intention. The vague enthusiasm of ll. 33-36 is wish-fulfilment, not a description of actuality. The comparison of COILA with "... some unkent-of isle/ Beside New Holland" effectively suggests prospects of hidden wealth and pleasurable discovery which the "isle" and COILA as a poetic subject share, but the overtones of hardship and difficulty of access inherent in "... whare wild-meeting oceans boil/ Besouth Magellan" hardly suit Burns's theme. The following stanza, ll. 43-48, is little more than a list. There are eleven proper names, and the final appeal to Simson is lacklustre:

We'll gar our streams an' burnies shine  
Up wi' the best. (ll. 53,54)

<sup>32</sup>Op. cit., p.132.

When Burns uses a diminutive like "burnies" it is a sign that he is writing carelessly or unenthusiastically. This suspicion is confirmed when we encounter "shine" which is a very weak word from a poet who is usually hypersensitive to the effects of movement and light.

Burns has attempted to argue Smith into joining with him to celebrate his native region in much the same way as a chairman of the board would try to persuade his shareholders to accept another rights issue. He has sketched the historical situation; he has cited examples of neglected opportunities; he finally makes a calculated appeal for support by pointing to areas suitable for future development. Fergusson's plight triggered a masterly, scornful stanza. COILA's fate produces this restrained, considered approach. Instead of eschewing an appeal to the intellect and securing the emotional commitment of his correspondent by the sweep and power of his verse -- his usual epistolary practice -- Burns attempts to convince Simson (whose degree of potential emotional assent he cannot accurately judge) of the reasonableness of his proposals.

The poem recovers only when a specific event in the "matter" of Kyle fires Burns's imagination. The example of Wallace's heroism, his triumph over an alien culture, and the fact of his origin in Kyle inspire the enthusiastic and abandoned verse of ll. 61-66. The power and immediacy of this stanza are poetic "evidence" of the kind of poetry which could be written in appreciative response to the traditions and history of Kyle. The challenge in ll. 61,62 refuses to consider a negative response. The forceful energy of verbs like "boil", "strode", "pressing onward" reveals a more insistent emotional pressure. The precision of "red-wat-shod" shows Burns's mind concentrated on the fact of Wallace's heroism, for in these words is all the glory and suffering of rebellion. Patriotism, in whatever form, is the duty of every noble man, as l.66 reveals. In this stanza, the exe-

cution is at last worthy of the intention. Until now, the idea of distinct, local poetry has been so anaemically expressed that we can feel little enthusiasm for it. When Burns is inspired by the vivid apprehension of a local event or hero, or a particular feature of the landscape, as he was by the similarity of his and Fergusson's situation in stanza four, he writes verse which itself gains our consent for the idea. The specific detail of ll. 67-72 contrasts markedly with the generalities of ll. 55-60. This evocation of an impressive local scene serves both to express Burns's genuine delight in Kyle's landscape, and also to provide his correspondent with an example of what could be achieved by one who was thus inspired. He details Kyle's varied appeal by describing the countryside, in ll. 67-70, in terms of the different senses and by noting its inspirational power in both Summer and Winter:

Ev'n winter bleak has charms to me,  
 When winds rave thro' the naked tree;  
 Or frosts on hills of Ochiltree  
                                   Are hoary gray;  
 Or blinding drifts wild-furious flee,  
                                   Dark'ning the day!           (11. 73-78)

The closing section from ll. 79-96 unites a Rousseauistic belief in the restorative and morally beneficent effects of rural life, sentimentalism, and a Horatian contract between the peace of the country and the corrupting worldliness of the bustling town. It also expresses Burns's personal conviction that the natural world was a repository of essential truths, relevant to the way in which society organizes itself and to the rules by which men live. The apostrophe to Nature in ll. 79-84 is the result of Burns's response to the specific landscape of Kyle. Poets, like Burns and Simson, who have eyes to see see in COILA a poetic resource of great and lasting value. They have a duty to respond to their native district and a duty to those who live there to celebrate its traditions and

beauty. In doing so, they preserve those traditions and reveal the moral lessons implicit in Nature.

The advice which Burns gives in ll. 85-90 seems to have little in common with the image of the poet presented in previous epistles to Sillar and Lapraik. However, such dissimilarity is superficial and is to be explained by the main concerns of this poem: the fitness of Kyle as a fruitful source of inspiration, and the need to encourage local poets. The stanza urges the primacy of immediate, emotional response:

The Muse, nae Poet ever fand her,  
Till by himsel he learn'd to wander,  
Adown some trottin burn's meander,  
                                  An' no think lang;  
O sweet, to stray an' pensive ponder  
                                  A heart-felt sang!                   (11. 85-90)

This is prompted by the same idea of freedom from "civilized" restraints in the "Commoners of air" of the epistle to Sillar (K51) and by the absence of formulae in "ae spark o' Nature's fire" of the first epistle to Lapraik (K57). This honest spontaneity and the lack of ulterior consideration is what places poets in the front line of defence against the ethics and practices of that omnipresent enemy, "The warly race". Their frantic struggle for wealth and their animal-like propensity for consumption is satirized in these lines:

The warly race may drudge an' drive,  
Hog-shouther, jundie, stretch an' strive,  
Let me fair NATURE's face describe,  
                                  And I, wi' pleasure,  
Shall let the busy, grumblin' hive  
                                  Bum owre their treasure.           (11. 91-96)

These drones, bent on accumulation, incapable of imaginative and independent action are the enemies of Burns and Simson, just as the Dryasdusts of Edinburgh succeeded in stifling Fergusson. The following stanza, therefore, pledges loyalty and friendship in the cause of poetry as a response to their slow, suffocating spirit. Burns ends on a note of conspiratorial triumph, dispelling the spectre of the money-grubbers and welcoming another member to his outlaw band. In

the parodically neat final stanza, he exemplifies the virtues of fun and liberation which he claims for poetry:

While Highlandmen hate tolls an' taxes;  
 While moorlan herds like guid, fat braxies;  
 While Terra firma, on her axis,  
                                 Diurnal furns,  
 Count on a friend, in faith an' practice,  
                                 In Robert Burns.                   (11. 103-08)

Although the "Postscript" of this epistle reveals Burns's impatience with systematic theology, it is cautious and restrained when compared with the sustained satiric attack of the contemporary "Holy Willie's Prayer". The reasons for this have been noted above. His correspondent was an unknown quantity and his epistle could have been intended to tempt Burns into the clutches of the Kirk Session. That body was then trying to discover the author of recent satires, and Burns had no wish to be unduly indiscreet or provocative. Thirdly, although he was fascinated by local events and personalities, Burns was bored by the minutiae of factional debate. His opposition to Auld Licht orthodoxy was more profound than a quarrel over patronage or adherence to the Confession of Faith. It was a matter of principle. The few references to religion in earlier epistles show that Burns did not conduct a crusade against the Reverend Auld and his Kirk Session. That is too narrow a conception of the role of the verse-epistle in Burns's life. The epistle satisfied many needs and was used for different ends. It encouraged self-expression; its flexible form contained, without distortion, the self-dramatization which Burns's antithetical spirit demanded. With it, he could broadcast his message and contact possible allies, while satisfying the need of the artist to have his craft recognized by an appreciative audience. However, despite such complex motivation, all the Mauchline epistles have certain features in common. For example, they combine passages of attack and celebration, and are inspired by a vision of



an alternative society which is less authoritarian and more equal. Like Dickens and Blake, Burns was totally opposed to the diminution of the human spirit by the stifling of imaginative creativity or by the imposition of arbitrary rules. One alternative to this mechanization of the soul was poetry. Its spontaneity, its individuality and immediacy were positive, life-giving forces with which to oppose the suffocating ethic of the "selfish, warly race". Poetry and the poetic spirit could sustain the individual, but Burns also regarded them as essential to the health of society, as the epistle to Sims on revealed. Hence his desire to contact those who shared his beliefs, consciously or unconsciously, and to enlist those who, by the fact of their practical jokes or their poetry, were kicking at the narrow confines of society. In his epistles, Burns resembles an agent planted behind enemy lines, seeking out the disaffected and uniting them in an effective, albeit scattered, opposition.

Direct confrontation with the Kirk in life, as in his epistles, was therefore inevitable, and in the later months of 1785, it happened. In the epistles to Goldie and M'Math the Auld Lights of Mauchline have replaced the "warly race", the "Coofs", the "set o' dull, conceited Hashes" as representatives of all that is negative, grim, and mechanical. Burns's attack on them was prompted by three factors; his concern for Kyle's traditions and its spiritual freedom, his need to communicate with men whose ideas he found stimulating or beliefs, congenial, and the local religious controversies which implicated himself and his friends. Each contributes to the power of these two epistles.

Burns's intention in writing to John Goldie was the same as that which had prompted his first epistle to Lapraik. Goldie's book, like Lapraik's song, demanded that Burns write to the author for its arguments and criticisms revealed a man whose ideas, independently

arrived at without formal theological training, were in tune with his own.<sup>33</sup> As Wallace had done, this local and humbly-born thinker was striving to overthrow a more powerful enemy force and to liberate men's spirits. Alone, he had devised solutions to questions of free-will and morality. In Burns's eyes, Goldie had struck a blow for personal freedom against authoritarian dogma. Unlike Lapraik he was no poet, but he was fighting the same foe, though with different weapons.

In the epistle, Burns describes the effect of Goldie's work on Orthodoxy by subtly ironic reportage. From his panoramic viewpoint he surveys the scene of a recent battle, switching from the battlefield itself to the field-hospitals where the remains of the Auld Licht forces have found a last refuge. The first survivor who meets his eye is "Sour Bigotry". Though crippled, he has hirkled off to mouth curses from a safe distance. The invective is revealing. Mention of "the ten Egyptian plagues" places him among the chosen people, a nice conflation of Biblical history and the doctrine of election. The snapping anger of "quick" (1.6) conveys his bitterness. Even Pharaoh had some time to recover from each new pestilence.

Another enemy general is in a worse condition. The description of the fate of "Superstition" sets the pattern for stanzas 2, 3, and 4. The first line of each gives a terse and occasionally ambiguous

<sup>33</sup>Burns's relationship with Goldie is instructive. Though the latter was a shrewd and eager capitalist, Burns could shut his mind to this aspect of his character and concentrate, instead, on the positive elements which united the two men in a common cause - their opposition to the doctrines of the Auld Lights. Goldie was a valuable "explosives expert", who had to be recruited. Burns was fighting a war, not choosing a running-mate. His talent for "demolition" had been demonstrated by his Essays on Various Subjects, Moral and Divine ... (Edinburgh: 1785) which Burns had read when it was re-issued in 1785. There, Goldie fires salvos at the Auld Licht's literal interpretation of the Scriptures, accusing them of intolerable pride in assuming their mortal interpretation could be exhaustive.

bulletin, as in l.7. The rest of the stanza is then devoted to Burns's gleeful expansion of her condition and ultimate fate. The ambivalent status of the reporter, a source of considerable humour to both Burns and Goldie, is revealed in the apparent sympathy of l.7. Burns appears to reproach his correspondent thus. "You ought to be ashamed. If only you could have seen the state poor Superstition was in!" Having raised the reader's expectation, Burns satisfies his curiosity by a hilarious presentation of the condition of each defeated combatant. He plays the sympathetic relative at the bedside, shaking his head in sadness, only to reverse this by the broad, debasing comedy of "Fye! bring Black Jock her state-physician,/To see her water:". Then, again, he reverts to the sorrowful as he adopts the polite circumlocutions appropriate at the bedside of a dying woman:

"Alas! there's ground for great suspicion,  
She'll ne'er get better. -- (ll. 11,12)

Burns moves on to the next casualty and subtly uses terms like 'redemption' and 'consumption' with their religious overtones to heighten the irony. "Enthusiasm's" past reviving but, paradoxically, she is also beyond saving by Christ's sacrifice, and this of a figure who had such a certain belief in divine favour. Moreover, not only is she "past redemption" but, as the alliteration of line 15 and the Biblical overtones of sudden destruction in "consumption" make clear, she is fast melting before the observer's eyes. At this point, Burns steps into the poem himself tossing out an irreverent and self-satisfied comment on her health. "Good riddance to bad rubbish", yells Burns in ll. 15 and 16, and then subsides into the respectful euphemism of "Her feeble pulse gies strong presumption,/She'll soon surrender".

Such masterly control over voice allows Burns some very complex effects. No less skilful is his careful construction as he builds to the climax of stanza four. There is a calculated progression from

"great suspicion" to "strong presumption" to the fact of death itself in the case of "Auld Orthodoxy". What seems like the record of a close observer is, in fact, a structure of praise and commendation for the effectiveness of Goldie's attack. Stanza four's vocabulary reveals the tenacity of Goldie's foe and her determination to resist, but the imagery of ll. 19, 20 suggests how her power and influence have been gradually decreasing. The seeming impregnability of Orthodoxy's position has been breached by earlier critics. Goldie's Essays ... have administered the "coup de grace". He has revealed the moral and intellectual gaps in her arguments, and she can no longer plug these holes through which her life-blood and her vigour flow away. She flounders, completely at Goldie's mercy. With considerable satisfaction, Burns makes arrangements for her end:

Auld Orthodoxy lang did grapple  
 For every hole to get a stapple;  
 But now, she fetches at the thrapple  
   And fights for breath;  
 Haste, gie her name up in the Chapel  
   Near unto death. -- (ll. 19-24)

After reviewing the disarray of these depleted forces, Burns addresses the perpetrator of the "misdeeds" directly. He parodies the reaction of the Orthodox supporters in ll. 25, 26 by capturing their blubbering, reproachful anger in the loose-lipped alliteration of "blame" and "black". But, as Burns knew from his own experience (and this lends his epistles their urgency), an enemy is most dangerous when wounded. The punishment of "A toom tar barrel/And twa red peats ..." (ll. 28,29) is at once menacing and satiric. It presents the Auld Licht image of God as the angry chastiser, the vengeful God of the "ten Egyptian plagues". Their logic tells them that critics of their system are heretics who should be punished accordingly. There is an unpleasant "final solution" quality in the seemingly innocuous phrase, "... end the quarrel" which is, in Burns's

mind, the result of the eye-for-an-eye mentality by which they live. The threat of revenge may be exaggerated, but the psychological motivation of the Orthodox rings true.

Burns has indirectly supported Goldie by stabbing at the Orthodox with his ironic reporting. He now openly aligns himself with Goldie and Taylor, while acknowledging that their talents differ from his. He can offer moral support, poetic skill and, most importantly, friendship. His isolation in Mauchline made Burns appreciate the support of a few friends. In a small, enclosed community, social courtesies, insignificant elsewhere, could have a greatly increased importance. In a similar manner, the publication by Ramsay of his seemingly frivolous verse-correspondence with Hamilton of Gilbertfield in the inimical atmosphere of early eighteenth-century Edinburgh had a significance greater than now appears from the poems alone. By publishing, Ramsay was claiming for poets and for their use of the vernacular an important place in the life of the city. For Burns in Mauchline, poetry was also symbolic, as was his declaration of friendship and support. The latter was a solemn pledge and a declaration of intention; the former, an act of faith and an act of rebellion.

Burns exemplifies this claim for poetry in stanzas six and seven. He urges Goldie to disregard the inevitable "smear campaign", the same technique which proves even more effective today. Instead, he should "E'en swinge the dogs; and thresh them sicker!/ The mair they squeel ay chap the thicker;" (ll. 37,38). Burns re-introduces the physical imagery of the opening stanzas with coarse and forceful verbs like "swinge" and "thresh". He knows his opponents are weakening, and contributes to their end with this flurry of blows. To ensure that the command of ll.37, 38 is carried out, he delves into his bag of personal experience and produces a prescription the effectiveness of which is guaranteed. Since they share "an Owther's pulse",

Burns recommends "... a hearty bicker/ O' something stout". As the deterministic theology of the Orthodox represents hopelessness and grimness, the extended celebration of alcohol in ll. 39-54 symbolizes health, good fellowship, and creativity. This apostrophe continues the attack begun in ll. 37,38, but by means of positive celebration. The Orthodox can be further weakened by these defiant lines in praise of drink. Burns thumbs his nose at them as he joyously lists its virtues, and brings the poem to a triumphant close with this picture of a healthier, saner world:

There's naething like the honest nappy;  
 Whare'll ye e'er see men sae happy,  
 Or women sonsie, saft and sappy,  
                   'Tween morn and morn,  
 As them wha like to taste the drappie  
                   In glass or horn. (ll. 43-48)

In the final stanza, Burns offers himself and his experience as proof of the restorative power of alcohol. These lines have the same function as the phrase, "I, Rob, am here", in the second epistle to Lapraik. His existence and capacity for enjoyment is proof that the Orthodox can be beaten. Like Byron or Pope, Burns invested his actions with a significance for others. He lived, in these Mauchline epistles, a representative life.

The poem does not so much end abruptly, as disappear. This is perhaps to be explained by the circumstances surrounding the only holograph text, that prepared for Robert Riddell and preserved in the volume of the Glenriddell MSS given to the laird of Friar's Carse. It seems likely that Burns revised the poem (as he did others in that collection) to make what was a local poem more immediately entertaining to a Dumfriesshire audience. In the revision, he may well have cut the poem to leave it in this unsatisfactory state. However, the next epistle on religion which Burns wrote is constructed with more skill. The epistle to M'Math is less cheeky, and more bitter

and serious. It is a declaration of faith.

John M'Math was ordained assistant and successor to the liberal minister, Wodrow, in Tarbolton in 1782 when the Burns family still lived at Lochlie. He had been educated at Glasgow University, a centre of more liberal theological teaching, and rapidly became one of the figures in the Orthodox demonology. His request for a copy of "Holy Willie's Prayer" reveals his sympathies. Burns replied with a deeply-felt epistle on the themes of personal and religious liberty in Ayrshire.<sup>34</sup> His knowledge that liberal thinkers, both lay and clerical, regarded his poetry as justified and effective was a source of strength. It confirmed his belief, expressed in ll. 35,36 and ll. 65,66 of this epistle, in the moral justification of poetry. Like Pope, whom he cites as mentor, he was convinced that satire was a necessary corrective and an effective response to slander and vilification. Such support made his isolation in Mauchline more tolerable and it lent an intellectual justification to his iconoclastic behaviour. However, although the support of M'Math was important, there are other sources of inspiration for this poem. One is his concern for his "native ground", but even more potent is his anger at the Kirk Session's treatment of the Mauchline lawyer, Gavin Hamilton.

Hamilton was one of the most important figures in Burns's pre-Edinburgh life. It was from him, in 1783, that Robert and Gilbert Burns rented Mossgiel when their father's illness made the situation at Lochlie appear hopeless. From that date, Hamilton was involved, to some extent, in every important event in Burns's

<sup>34</sup> Fortunately, Cromek, who first printed the epistle, is not our only source regarding M'Math's liberal tendencies. His appearance in "The Holy Tulzie" (K52) as a tormentor of the Auld Lights is probably a safer guide.

life before his departure for Edinburgh. Even in the capital Burns wrote to him as a trusted friend, using his sceptical shrewdness as an honest sounding-board by which to estimate the true worth of his overwhelming reception by Society. In Mauchline, Burns corresponded with Hamilton regarding the publication of his poetry, sought his advice in the Armour affair and discussed his proposed emigration with him. In turn, this avid admirer of his poetry introduced Burns to influential liberals in Ayrshire society and, with a sense of local patriotism Burns doubtless admired, was the probable author of a letter rebutting the charges of ingratitude levelled at Ayr by one, Allan Ramsay, in the Edinburgh Evening Courant, 13 Nov. 1786.<sup>35</sup>

Burns dedicated his first edition of poetry to him and chose to regard Hamilton as his patron. However, they united as equals and fellow-conspirators in their defiance of the ultra-Sabbatarianism and conservatism of the Mauchline Kirk Session. Both had personal experience of that body's far-reaching power. From 1777 to 1787, Gavin Hamilton was in dispute with Mauchline Kirk Session. As has been previously noted (p.85), the original quarrel arose over an accusation that Hamilton, in his position as "collector of the poor's stint", had withheld certain monies and that consequently the deserving poor experienced hardship. The virulence with which this quarrel was conducted ensured that the Kirk Session would attempt to run down Hamilton on other pretexts and this they did, accusing him, in 1784, of libelling the Session and pursuing the matter to the level of the Presbytery of Ayr and the Synod of Glasgow. Although he was successfully defended before the Presbytery by Robert Aiken, a liberal lawyer and close friend of Burns, the Session pursued him still, accusing him, in 1787, of the sin of Sabbath-breaking. Having ex-

<sup>35</sup>The two letters are most accessible in Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage, ed. D.A. Low (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), pp. 65-66.



perceived Hamilton's benevolence, Burns would be infuriated by any accusation which cast doubts on his probity and charity as administrator of the relief fund for the poor. Such action would tend to confirm (although Burns needed little persuasion) his belief that the Auld Licht Session was motivated by a desire to cling to power and make life intolerable for its opponents. Ironically, however, of the charges levelled against Hamilton, that concerning administrative malpractice alone seems to have been justified. This fact is important in two respects. Firstly, it alters one's image of Hamilton and, secondly, it makes one question the relationship between Burns and the lawyer. It is now possible to see his interest in Burns's poetry as the recognition by a cunning, ambitious man that here was a useful talent which could be employed in his fight for professional survival in Mauchline. (Conviction by the Kirk Session on a charge of maladministration would have made Hamilton's position as a lawyer within that tight community impossible). Hamilton, however, was no eminence grise, masterminding Burns's attacks on the Orthodox. That would be to make Burns appear as a naive dupe, which he never was. Nevertheless, one can accept that he was, for a time, dazzled by the man's spirited, liberal stance, and over-sealous to repay a debt of gratitude. Certainly, he acts like an errand-boy in Edinburgh, or so his letter of 7 Dec., 1786 seems to suggest.<sup>36</sup> He may have seen him clearly only from the novel vantage-point of Edinburgh, for, shortly after his return to Mauchline in 1788, they seem to have quarreled over Burns's refusal to agree to some financial arrangement which Hamilton wished to make. However, at the time of writing this epistle, Burns was convinced that the lawyer was the object of a campaign of character assassination and harassment by the Kirk Session. This accounts for the epistle's

<sup>36</sup>See F., I, 55.

blazing indignation. Burns's assumption was as immediate as, today, if a West German were arrested for espionage in East Germany, his countrymen would assume his innocence. Past actions of the Kirk Session had so robbed them of any respect in Burns's eyes that impartial consideration was well-nigh treasonable. His epistles are committed poems and to this extent he was as unreasonable as the Orthodox. However, his commitment was to the better cause. He saw men as beings worthy of freedom. This insight, which had for Burns all the clarity of a vision, gives his epistles their exhilarating conviction. As this epistle makes plain, Burns was compelled to write in Mauchline, and such pressure explains the speculative, proselytizing tone of the epistles. As he wrote, he was testing ideas and gaining the support of others for them. Epistolary writing was a process of definition and justification. When he was removed from this environment of conflict and opposition much of the urgency and speculative daring goes out of his verse for, in Edinburgh and Dumfries, he had no similar compulsion urging him to write, nor a comparable sense of commitment to a cause.

The epistle to M'Math is at once a statement of belief in the superiority of New Licht doctrine and the nature of poetic responsibility, and a passionate defence of a friend. Burns's reading of the situation in Mauchline and his growing awareness of the role of poetry compel him to write. This sense of duty is clearly visible in the opening stanza. Here, the phrase "dedicate the hour" (l.5) lends the epistle an air of consecration although Burns avoids, until the peroration of ll. 79ff., inappropriately serious language. Here, too, he brings his role as poet forcibly before M'Math by a technique which resembles the film-maker's "cutting". Lines 1-6 present a series of images unconnected in themselves but which, by their juxtaposition, give a meaning to the final image which it could not have had alone.

Burns is seen first as a poet, temporarily absorbed in the composition of this epistle. It is about the effect of his past activity in that field that he addresses M'Math.

In a rueful second stanza, one can detect a note of battle-fatigue as Burns lists the engagements at which his Muse has fought valiantly. This is a very different Muse from the harridan with whom he squabbled in his second epistle to Lapraik. In this poem, poetry is conceived of as a weapon. He describes his confrontations with the Orthodox in terms reminiscent of David and Goliath. He is "a simple, countra bardie". They, however, are "a pack sae sturdy", a phrase which accords them all the tenacity and skill in pursuit of fox-hounds. These two stanzas neatly express Burns's conflicting emotions. He is pleased that his satire has proved effective, but is apprehensive of the consequences. And deservedly so, as "anathem" (l.12) indicates, for the Kirk had powers, not so much of excommunication, but of imposed isolation, of rendering one an "untouchable" in a close-knit, conservative society.

However, the emotional pendulum swings away from this frightening prospect as Burns explains the motives behind his satirical attacks. In the face of hypocrisy, he cannot remain silent, and lays bare the deceit of the Orthodox in an accurately-controlled stanza of invective:

But I gae mad at their grimaces,  
 Their sighan, cantan, grace-prood faces,  
 Their three-mile prayers, an' hauf-mile graces,  
   Their raxan conscience,  
 Whase greed, revenge, an' pride disgraces  
   Waur nor their nonsense.       (11. 19-24)

Line 20 captures their smug expressions, and in l.21 Burns snaps at their self-indulgently prolonged worship with comic exaggeration. The image of excessive length is continued in "Their raxan conscience". Like their prayers, it can stretch interminably and so can conveniently

accommodate itself to any action, however sinful. Their spiritual deceit is a greater disgrace than the mere physical manifestations of their hypocrisy, however. To reveal the "... greed, revenge, an' pride ..." of the Orthodox and to demonstrate that his anger is not simply rancorous spite, Burns cites the case of "Gaun" (l.25). The most striking feature of this epistle is Burns's understanding of the reader's reaction and his manipulation of it. He has sensed the need for proof of his condemnation and, with Gavin Hamilton, it is there before us. Like an advocate who has gauged his jury's mind to a nicety, he drives his case home by confronting them, at the correct psychological moment, with Exhibit A.

This epistle is one of Burns's most rhetorical poems in its persistent search for the most effective means of presenting his argument. "Gaun" is given prominence by being placed at the beginning of the line, as if his case were so blatant an example of persecution that it springs immediately to mind. Like Burns, he is one man opposed by many, and Burns writes as one member of an embattled minority to another. The rhetorical question, "An' may a bard no crack his jest/What way they've use't him?", is a triumphant vindication of his friendship with Hamilton and his commitment to the New Licht cause. The epistle is not the poem of a party-hack, however, although it is much more uncompromising than that to Goldie. The distinction made between the pleasurable aspects of satirizing the Auld Lights in ll. 29,30 and the more heroic view of poetic purpose outlined in ll. 35,36 is proof of this. Mischievous delight in seeing his shafts strike home and exhibitionist virtuosity are not qualities often found in verse written to order.

Hamilton's plight prompts the more elevated lines 25-30 where Burns places him within a tradition which, in the poet's mind, derives ultimately from Christ's suffering; namely, that of the good

man maligned. Hamilton is elevated to a figure representative of suffering virtue. The appeal for sympathy is made explicit and directed at a wider audience than M'Math, as Burns poses the question which forms one of the epistle's basic themes:

An' shall his fame an' honor bleed  
                                     By worthless skellums,  
 An' not a muse erect her head  
                                     To cove the blellums?           (11. 33-36)

The role of the Muse is correspondingly elevated, for this is a heroic view of the poet's duty. He is seen as an avenging angel, scourge of the oppressors and fearless defender of the unjustly accused. Burns shares this view of the moral justification of satiric poetry with Pope whose skill he modestly craves that he might make his attack more effective and so adequately fill the role outlined above. So eager for this triumph is Burns that he can almost feel the Orthodox cowering under his attack. Such is the effect of 11.37-42 where his plan of action is sketched with the precision and detail of a man who has long savoured his revenge. The alliterative 1.39 sounds particularly vicious in the mouth of a Scot. The prospect of uncovering deceit and hypocrisy always fires Burns's poetic imagination, and in these lines he gives us an image of Christ driving from the temple those who abuse it, or of the perceptive countryman at a fair, exposing the Auld Licht's spiritual sleight-of-hand as they mesmerize a gullible crowd with their slick dexterity. He would "... tell aloud/ Their jugglin' hocuspocus arts". This image of exposure, which is central to the Mauchline epistles, expresses his desire for a less complicated and more honest world. Burns favours spontaneity and the honest, emotional response, for this ensures that one's behaviour<sup>v</sup> is neither calculated nor affected. He is Mauchline's Bernstein and Woodward; he believes that the poet must expose the Kirk's corruption of power. Only after such a traumatic purge can

the institution regain its respect.

Self-scrutiny ought to lead to humility, as it does in the confession of ll. 43,44 which acts as a corrective to the determined confidence of the previous stanza and re-establishes a sense of familiar intimacy. Such control over voice brings the speaker before us and lends personal animosity to the righteous indignation of ll. 43-48. Burns's attack is justified because it is made from the basis of humble self-examination and not, like the Auld Licht's, from an arrogant presumption of superiority. "God knows", exclaims Burns, "I'm bad enough, but I'd rather be an out-and-out atheist' Than under gospel colours hid be/ Just for a screen'!" "Atheist clean" is a measure of Burns's opposition to the deceit and hypocrisy of the Auld Lights. The atheist has the merit of directness; he makes no attempt to masquerade as something else under the cloak of hypocrisy.<sup>37</sup> It is the distasteful cowardice of Auld Licht hypocrisy which Burns condemns in the climax of this stanza. The image, in ll. 47,48, is of a sly soldier assuming the colours of the forces he has fought to avoid capture, as the Orthodox don the garb of virtue to escape detection and justified censure. The speech pattern of this stanza moves from an initial confession to a rousing statement of conviction. In ll. 49-54, this is repeated. The phrase "may like" has an ambiguous connotation of definition (outlining what is permissible) and apology (excusing minor faults), but this indeterminacy is resolved in the ringing statement of the final two lines:

An honest man may like a glass,  
 An honest man may like a lass,  
 But mean revenge, an' malice fause  
 He'll still disdain, (ll. 49-52)

Enjoyment of a "lass" and a "glass" is no grave crime since it involves

<sup>37</sup>This recalls the choice offered in the epistle to Dr. John Mackenzie (see Appendix One). Man can choose between salvation and damnation. Burns asks only that, having made his choice, he be open and unrepentant.

neither self-deceit nor the imposition of one's will upon others. An "honest man", however, will reject "mean revenge, an' malice fause" because they conflict with true honesty of heart. It is characteristic of the Auld Lights that they will act thus and then compound the fault by crying "zeal for gospel laws". "Like some we ken" (l.54) brings M'Math into the poem as a sympathetic presence, and its knowing tone implies that Burns need go no further. The technique is extremely effective. Nothing is more infuriating to arbitrary Authority than ridicule. Outright physical defiance can be dealt with, for that, at least, implies recognition of Authority's strength in attempting to overcome it. Ridicule, satire, and humour, however, are altogether more difficult. They are nimbler than armed rebellion. Their very insubstantiality is their power since, as their mockery resides in the mind and the heart, once free no physical confinement or punishment can restrict it. Like the guerilla, the satirist seizes the advantage by fighting on ground of his own choosing. Burns's refusal to be specific robs the Auld Lights of the means of redress without seeming to attack them openly. So long as this buzzing campaign of satirical laughter united and strengthened their opponents, the Auld Lights found it difficult to retain their credibility as the controlling power in the lives of their parishioners.

In ll. 55-60, Burns attacks the hypocrite as a representative type. This pummelling burst has all the fury and variety of attack of a fighter who sees his opponent reeling on the ropes. Line 55 condemns the ease with which they can posture as Burns describes them popping suitably religious sentiments into their mouths as readily as peppermints and savouring their flavour. "They talk o' mercy, grace an' truth". They talk of, but they do not practice these virtues; such is the implication of the phrasing. "For what?" This jabbing uppercut seems to halt the attack, but, in fact, it has "set up" his

opponent for a knockout punch:

... to gie their malice skouth  
                   On some puir wight,  
 An' hunt him down, o'er right an' ruth,  
                   To ruin streight. (ll. 57-60)

This coursing image recalls earlier references to "a pack sae sturdy". Burns compares them to hounds, unconcernedly trampling down considerations of Christian justice and personal respect in their instinctive hunt after "some puir wight". The image invites further reflection on the power which the Kirk Session could wield. As was noted above, Hamilton would indeed have been reduced to "ruin" had the accusations proved justified.

With the close of this violent, fluent stanza, Burns moves from attack and justification to the celebration of New Licht ideals and his encomium to M'Math. Such a change of direction is typical of the Classical epistle and its Augustan imitations, but Burns need not have read Pope to write thus. Burns's turn of mind in Mauchline was predominantly visionary and constructive. Having cowed "the blellums" and defined the poet's responsibility to use his skills in a worthy cause, he now serves that cause further by positive celebration. The tone becomes elevated as suits the idea of consecration detected in the first stanza. Burns uses apostrophe as the appropriate poetic form to capture the spontaneous emotional surge when he addresses "... Religion! maid divine!" The device is, however, clumsy and the abject humility of ll. 62-64 jars. Nevertheless, the justification of his actions springs from deep, personal conviction:

To stigmatize false friends of thine  
                   Can ne'er defame thee. (ll. 65,66)

This repeats, in a more elevated formulation, the sentiments of ll. 29,30 and ll. 35,36. One cannot question the sincerity although one may justifiably regret the lack of originality in its expression. We must not, however, confuse a convention with a pose. The former is a



matter of historical fitness and expression as here, where Burns modulates from a vivid, conversational style to the heightened form of apostrophe since both were compatible within the conventions of the eighteenth-century epistle, which encouraged the union of praise and blame, celebration and censure. Alternatively, a pose involves elements of conscious deceit by the poet, of himself and his audience. If Burns were posing in this final section the earlier part of the poem would be mere spite, and although there is a clear personal motivation in his criticism of the Auld Lights, it is not that of spiteful revenge. It rather leans toward a genuine desire for reform and an equally genuine belief in the value of the ideals of the New Lights. Despite the unappealing diction of "With trembling voice I tune my strain/ To join with those", we can, nevertheless, recognize the emotional fervour of the final section. Burns had sensed, with an unmistakable thrill, that his verse was an effective weapon and could be used with advantage to root out a deadening morality and champion an alternative set of rules for life. In writing poetry, he was rendering a patriotic service by restoring to Ayr, his "... dear ... native ground", that reputation as a cradle of personal, civil, and religious freedom which he had accorded it in "The Vision" (K62).

The imagery of war and struggle which occurs throughout the epistle is here at its most dense, as Burns writes of his determination to continue the fight:

In spite o' crowds, in spite o' mobs,  
 In spite of undermining jobs,  
 In spite o' dark banditti stabs  
                   At worth an' merit,  
 By scoundrels, even wi' holy robes,  
                   But hellish spirit.                   (11. 73-78)

The control over the rhythms of this peculiarly Scottish stanza is masterly. Burns takes the opportunities it affords for varying line-length to build to a telling, paradoxical climax. Skilful, too, is

the precise differentiation of the kinds of dangers to be faced, from overwhelming numbers, to the sly cunning of a few, and the outright malice of "dark banditti stabs" characteristics of those who would hide under " ... gospel colors .../ Just for a screen". This same skill is displayed in the swift, paradoxical juxtaposition of "holy robes" and "hellish spirit" (ll. 77,78) which effectively reveals the hypocrisy of the Auld Lights by yoking together outward appearance and inner reality.

This stanza is the most effective of the verses in the final section; the same technique of accumulative repetition is used to place M'Math firmly within the group of New Licht supporters:

Sir, in that circle you are nam'd;  
Sir, in that circle you are fam'd:      (ll. 85,86)

These lines, however, are too studied and contrived; they betray an unpractised hand. This is hardly surprising for, before Edinburgh, Burns had little occasion to flatter anybody. The epistle closes with an apostrophe to the "presbytereal bound" of Ayr where "manly preachers" (as opposed to the cringing, sleekit Auld Lights) are renowned as "men" and "Christians". Such praise deliberately recalls his definition of the "honest man" at an earlier point in the poem, but the ending of the epistle is rather flat. So eager is Burns to claim for M'Math an exemplary character that he is led into misrepresenting the Auld Lights. The image of them as grudging connoisseurs of M'Math's "winning manner" (l.90) hardly suits the obsessive, vindictive hypocrites who pursued Gavin Hamilton. Burns's enthusiasm for New Licht ideals has clouded his usually shrewd judgement of a poem's coherence. He offers the Tarbolton minister as the embodiment of those ideals, but in such a way that the poem's consistency is disturbed. The same imbalance characterizes the epistle to Graham of Fintry (K230) where, again, the idealization of the correspondent leads to strained falsity of tone.

These epistles to Goldie and M'Math have been considered consecutively since, together, they form Burns's most detailed poetic statement on his religious sympathies. However, he wrote a short epistle, his third, to John Lapraik shortly before that to M'Math, and this merits brief consideration. It is little more than an example of Burns keeping his poetic fences in good repair. With this epistle (K68), he fills in the gaps in his protective barrier of sympathetic correspondence. This poem is much more subdued than the others to the same correspondent. It has little of their sweeping bravura and is altogether more intimate. Apart from brief references to "holy men" and "kirk-folk", only Burns and Lapraik figure in the epistle.

Lapraik is addressed familiarly as a fellow man of the land, because the epistle gives, in small compass, Burns's conception of the eighteenth-century rustic ideal. A moderate sufficiency of comfort, wealth, and homely nourishment, the company of trusted friends, and the exchange of verse in a congenial atmosphere is a formula for contentment which recalls Ramsay's Horatian imitations. Given Burns's combative spirit, the poem is unusually tranquil. Yet he presents no falsely idealized image of country life, for the two men knew the hardships of an Ayrshire farmer too well. It is significant that Burns wishes Lapraik well by hoping that he suffers none of the misfortunes to which the farmer is so vulnerable at harvest-time. Such dangers are keenly felt. Burns conveys the personal element in the contest between Man the farmer and rude Nature by the vivid personification of a rampant North Wind:

May Boreas never thresh your rigs,  
 Nor kick your rickles aff their legs,  
 Sendin' the stuff o'er muirs an' hags  
 Like drivin' wrack; (11. 7-10)

The rewards of this struggle can be proportionately great. There is

a Keatsian richness in "wags" (l.11); it well describes the top-heavy, ponderous movement of ripe grain as it sways in the breeze. This wish for a good harvest allows Burns to speak of his own hurried condition and so fix himself, as he liked to do in epistles, as a clear, physical presence in his correspondent's mind. With the economy of a busy man and skilful poet, he also uses this detail to excuse his failure to reply. Such polite concern for Lapraik is not conventional, but is evident throughout Burns's three epistles to him, and is one of the most engaging aspects of the relationship between the younger man and his elderly correspondent. Lapraik was something of a surrogate father.

Clearly, this is to be no epistle attacking the clergy or the "warly race". Burns dismisses them abruptly in stanza five. His interest stops with Lapraik, and the epistle is written in the egocentric, exclusive atmosphere of male companionship:

But let the kirk-folk ring their bells,  
Let's sing about our noble sels; (ll. 25,26)

This last line demonstrates the determinedly self-regarding nature of this epistle but it has wider significance as an example of Burns's belief that his viewpoint, his ideas, his life (and, by implication, those of others like him) were relevant and valuable.<sup>38</sup> The inspiration for their songs is not to come "frae heathen hills", but from such traditional Scottish sources as "... browster wives an' whiskie stills,/They are the muses" (ll. 29,30). This recalls the cultural nationalism in the vernacular tradition of Ramsay and Fergusson. In

<sup>38</sup>This certainty also underlies "The Twa Dogs ..." where Ceasar and Luath, by their contemplative colloquy on the condition of their respective masters, strip away misconceptions and, more importantly, accord each the same degree of importance. Ceasar's lines 47,48ff., "I've aften wonder'd, honest LUath,/What sort o' life poor dogs like you have;", explain the fascination which Burns was to hold for a capital city which was becoming increasingly conscious of itself as an urban centre. This fact also goes some way to explain Burns's determinedly correct behaviour there. Had he acted impolitely or performed badly under such curious scrutiny, he would have betrayed his class, his "folk".

previous epistles, Burns had placed Lapraik in that tradition. It is a small sign of his increasing confidence that he is now prepared to ally himself with them also. He knows that he is something more than a local poet.

The emphasis of line 26 gives a resounding smack of approval to the plan. Drink was a potent symbol for Burns. In poems like "Scotch Drink" (K77) it was a symbol of Scotland's independence, but it could also inspire poetry and restore the body. (Only Burns could believe that brandy clears the head, as he advises Lapraik in lines 5 and 6.) It represented that liberated, impulsive life which Burns placed in opposition to the cold hand of Orthodoxy but, here, it is the means whereby true friendships are cemented. In ll. 31-36 their companionship is pledged with the mock-solemnity of legal forms and proceedings; the firm clasp of friendship is suggested by "knot it" (l.33) with its connotations of tightness and intermingling.

Like all Burns's utopias, this is made to seem attainable in the future. For the present, however, there is the harvest which demands so much labour and on which so much depends:

But if the beast and branks be spar'd  
Till kye be gaun without the herd,  
An' a' the vittel in the yard,  
  An' theekit right,  
I mean your ingle-side to guard  
  Ae winter night.           (11. 37-42)

Unlike the meeting of ll. 109-14 in the first epistle to Lapraik, this is not clearly visualized in physical detail. Here, Burns is more concerned to stress the bond of emotion and fellow-feeling. The meeting will celebrate friendship but it will also form a cathartic release from the pressures of the harvest, and both will be achieved with the aid of rejuvenating alcohol. The epistle opened with an attainable ideal of rustic life. It closes by celebrating another, the freedom and joy of youth, "Sweet ane an' twenty!" Their discrepancy in age

was part of the attraction each man had for the other:

Then muse-inspirin' aqua-vitae  
 Shall make us baith sae blythe an' witty,  
 Till ye forget ye're auld an' gutty,  
                                   An' be as canty  
 As ye were nine year less than thretty,  
                                   Sweet ane an' twenty!           (11. 43-48)

Lapraik had preserved that youthfulness of spirit despite a life of misfortune. This shared outlook and common situation united the two men. With a neat touch, Burns does not end the poem on this affirmative climax. Reality intervenes; the utopia is temporarily postponed; Burns rushes off with breathless haste to save the "stooks".

Between September of 1785 when he wrote to M'Math and the winter of the same year when he wrote his epistle to Smith (K79), Burns produced a series of poems which, for their excellence and variety of theme and treatment, cannot be matched by the work of any comparable period. In "To a Mouse ..." (K69), Burns speculates with compassion on Man's condition. "The Holy Fair" (K70) is his amused and tolerant panorama of humanity. "The Twa Dogs ..." (K71) is an even handed but satiric review of the concept of class, and "The Cotter's Saturday Night ..." (K72) gives Burns's version of the "noble savage" myth. All demonstrate that his questioning intelligence was seeking wider areas of inquiry than Mauchline could offer, although local events still provided the initial stimulus for speculation. In "Halloween" (K73), he recognizes the value of the folk-tradition but examines it from an educated, if tolerant, standpoint. "Scotch Drink" (K77) still preserves his satiric bite but, taken together, these poems reveal a surging expansion of interest and a corresponding readiness to devise appropriate forms of expression to meet the challenge. Burns uses the epistle to Smith, as he had earlier the epistle to Sillar (K51), to exhibit the powers of insight and control which he had now developed. In so doing, he wrote his finest epistle and a great individualist

poem. His personality is stamped upon it, and it rings with conviction.

Smith was, by 1785, Burns's most intimate friend in Mauchline and the two remained on good terms even after the merchant's son removed to Linlithgow. He was six years younger than the poet and had, like Burns, fretted under strict parental control. He proved a ready, if unthinking, participant in the ploys with which he, Burns, and Richmond shocked and defied the conservative element in Mauchline.<sup>39</sup> Burns gives him a prominent position in the "COURT OF EQUITY", and the strength of their friendship may be judged from his inclusion in "The Farewell".<sup>40</sup> It is appropriate that he should be mentioned there with Jean Armour, for Smith was the only friend who remained loyal in the testing Summer of 1786 when Burns was being pursued by an outraged father who, like many others in Mauchline, longed to see this young firebrand get his just desserts.<sup>41</sup> Smith's move to Linlithgow in 1787 (where he became a partner in a calico-printing firm) did not destroy the friendship, for Burns continued to write him letters (in prose). Those written in Mauchline had been brief and informative; he confided in Smith on pressing personal matters like Jean Armour's pregnancy and his projected emigration. The later epistles provide his absent friend with details of Mauchline

<sup>39</sup>John Richmond, whom Burns befriended when he was a clerk in Gavin Hamilton's office, was yet another rumbustious character who had already done public penance for fornication. Their characters reveal that Burns chose his correspondents not for their intellectual calibre, but for their representative quality. Lapraik was an "old Scotch Bard"; Sillar, a fiddler, poet, and lover of the "lasses". Smith received this epistle because he was one of the "ram-stam boys".

<sup>40</sup>See, respectively, "Libel Summons" (K109), ll. 33-36 and "The Farewell" (K116), ll. 11-14.

<sup>41</sup>See Burns's testimony to Smith's character in F., I, '22.

gossip, the triviality of which is a measure of their shared experience and interest.<sup>42</sup> However, more than most of the letters written to Ayrshire friends from Edinburgh, those sent to Smith seek to entertain, provide, and amuse. For example, that written during his tour of the Western Highlands imparts information, but does so in a very different way from the letters to Gavin Hamilton or his brother.<sup>43</sup>

The letter to Smith has a pace and humour lacking in the others. There are swift and bewildering changes of subject and a dazzling variety of expression, from breathless description to the humorous recollection of an awkward courtship. Burns slips into different roles with ease and throws off entertaining asides as he proceeds. In short, his prose comes alive with the same bustling fervour as his verse when he is certain of his correspondent. The epistle to Smith is like that to Sillar. Here, too, he is writing a showpiece epistle, but he is now altogether more certain of his abilities and his ideas. There is none of the awkwardness and hesitancy of the earlier poem. Burns controls this epistle with ease, treating a variety of themes without confusion. He produces a poem which is at once a familiar epistle to a close friend and a fervent and deeply-considered poetic statement. He has combined the themes of earlier epistles into a coherent and carefully-orchestrated whole.

Smith's character is established immediately in the first three stanzas as a testimony to his fitness to receive the epistle. The comparison of him with "the sleest, pawkie thief" accords him an appropriate anti-authority bias and places him firmly on Burns's side of the barricade. Their identification of outlook is total. Smith has "... some warlock-brief/Owre human hearts;" and his spirit has

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., I, 95.

<sup>43</sup>See, respectively, F., I, 98-100; I, 121; and I, 124.



possessed Burns. His loyalty is unquestioned, his character plain. Unlike the Auld Lights of the epistle to M'Math, in Smith outward appearance and inner reality coincide:

That auld, capricious carlin, Nature,  
To mak amends for scrimpet stature,  
She's turn'd you off, a human-creature  
  On her first plan,  
And in her freaks, on ev'ry feature,  
  She's wrote, the Man.           (11. 13-18)

Just as Burns is irresistibly drawn by Smith's open character, he is similarly powerless to resist "the fit o' rhyme" (1.19). In this stanza, Burns uses the image of the still to convey the strangeness of composition. It is as mysterious as the process whereby the commonplace elements of barley and water are transmuted into the liquid gold of whisky. The words "barmie", "yerket", and "working prime" also capture the turbulent, seething quality of creativity. Burns's question, "Hae ye a leisure-moment's time/To hear what's comin?", suggests the inevitability of the process. He describes himself as a passive mouthpiece, and the meaning which attaches to this word today is particularly appropriate. Burns was the spokesman for a small group in Kyle and, as such, he could not remain silent. For him, composition was as inevitable and the results as powerful as the process of nuclear fission. However, the question highlights another aspect of Burns's epistolary practice. It reads like the inquiry of a showman before he draws aside the curtain. Like a practised magician, he is ready to enthrall his audience. Although conscious of the audience, he nevertheless does not pander to it or give it only what it wants to hear. Far from restricting him, the sense of an appreciative audience freed Burns's talent, and liberated his imagination. In this epistle to his intimate friend, he could indulge the many aspects of his multiform character in a way that was both cathartic and constructive. Here, he could vent his spleen,

construct new worlds, and create different personae. But, as the spokesman for and champion of his rebel band, he is also determined to excel in the projection of their philosophy and to defend it against attack. The poem is a personal statement but also a codification of ideas shared with others.

This opposition of public and private, of spontaneity and calculation is at the core of the poem. Burns gives us a personal reaction and then confidently uses his experience as a base for sweeping generalizations of universal applicability. One moment he is confessing in a whisper; the next, hailing a universal truth. Only in the freedom of expression and conception which the epistle encouraged could the darting swiftness of Burns's mind find adequate outlet. Despite its frequent oscillations the poem remains a coherent whole because it is the honest record of one man's mind as he struggles to explain his situation satisfactorily and find in that examination truths of importance to others.

The first truth for which Burns is the mouthpiece is the emphatic "I rhyme for fun" (l.30). This gains prominence by Burns's careful construction of the stanza. The first four and last two lines are contrasted by the repetition of a syntactical pattern in the former and by the defiant "For me" of line 29 which prefigures a personal discovery independently arrived at. There is no real difference in meaning between "... an aim I never fash;" and "I rhyme for fun.", but the final line reads as an original truth by reason of the careful manipulation of the reader's response in Burns's handling of the stanza-form.

This revelation is an early declaration of principle and one which, from line 66 onwards, is expanded into a philosophy of life. Poetry is one aspect of that "Magic-wand", "Pleasure", which Burns advocates as the only action open to men like himself as they face a hos-

tile and unequal world. He appreciates the spontaneity and pleasurable self-satisfaction of composition, and contrasts it with the utilitarian view of poetry in ll. 25-28 which sees rhyming as a means of self-advancement. Its lack of calculation and immediacy was its distinguishing characteristic, for that ensured its honesty of response. "Fun" is not to be equated with frivolity. As Burns's examination of "Pleasure" will make plain, it is a much more complex concept. "Fun" contrasts the oral-based with the book-based tradition, imagination with dullness, spontaneity with sober planning, and freedom with restriction. It is a beacon lighting the way to the "enchanted fairy-land" (1.68).

Immersion in the ether of poetry enables Burns to face the harsh blows which Fate has dealt him:

The star that rules my luckless lot,  
Has fated me the russet coat,  
An' damn'd my fortune to the groat;  
But, in requit,  
Has blest me with a random-shot  
O' countra wit. (ll. 31-36)

The subtle and ironic use of "damn" and "bless", like the verb "dedicate" in the epistle to M'Math, raises his fate to a more profound plane and states starkly the essential conflict between spontaneity and calculation which is examined at length in ll.139ff.

Burns's recognition of his talent in ll. 35,36 leads naturally to the intimate confession of stanza seven. In stanzas seven to ten, Burns achieves a subtlety which is usually denied him by critics of his verse. On the one level, he is seen to be confessing genuine doubts to a friend and so obtaining that emotional release which was part of the epistolary form's attraction. An alternative interpretation, however, is that the objections which Burns places in the mouth of "Something" are Burns's rueful admission that his type of poetry, though talented, will go unnoticed because it does not conform to the book-based tradition. In this view, stanzas nine and ten envisage

a fate for Burns which is unjust. He is condemned to obscurity, not because he is unworthy, but because he is different. Such ambiguity is an accurate reflection of Burns's state of mind. Although more confident than in the epistle to Sillar, he was shrewd enough to be disturbed by the recognition that his poetry was outside the experience of most critics. The praise of Ayrshire friends who shared his background and, to some extent, his experience of oral tradition was no certain guarantee of a similar response from critics whose reading of poetry was book-based and literate.

It is difficult to trace any link between the image of the poet in stanzas nine and ten which owes much to Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard" and that of stanza six. Nevertheless, this does not destroy the poem's coherence, for we can recognize the former image as the honest reaction of an apprehensive and uncertain man. He has thought through the consequences of stanzas seven and eight, and we have followed his gradual absorption in this prospect. The swing from the superabundant confidence of line 30 to the self-pity of ll. 59,60 is a measure of the accuracy and honesty with which Burns has conveyed the movement of his mind. From his particular experience in stanzas seven and eight he has built an image of general significance in nine and ten. This extrapolation from the personal to the universal is characteristic of the movement of the epistle.

At this low point on the emotional graph where the verse has slowed to suit the sombre mood, Burns shakes himself out of his depression by a determined concentration on actuality. "Just now" (l.62) is the watchword of the stanza. With a daring refusal to consider the future, he raps out instructions to his crew - that is, Smith and the others who think as he does. They pile sail on reckless sail to capture every breath of "Enjoyment's gale" (l.65) and, like a crew too long dominated by a harsh skipper, they "Heave Care

o'er-side" in a justifiable mutiny.

The speed and vigour of this volte-face leaves us breathless, and in his justification of this sudden change Burns celebrates a very different image of life and its purpose than that envisaged in ll. 49-60. He begins his explanation in ll. 67, 68 with convincing reasonableness:

This life, sae far's I understand,  
Is a' enchanted fairy-land, (ll. 67, 68)

Pleasure distorts the sense of time and defies temporality by speeding one's life to the point where the passage of time goes unnoticed. Future consequences are not considered. His consciousness of Man's transient nature explains Burns's advocacy of immediate enjoyment as the appropriate reaction to the world:

The magic-wand then let us wield;  
For, ance that five an' forty's speel'd,  
See, crazy, weary, joyless Eild,  
                                    Wi' wrinkl'd face,  
Comes hostan, hirplan owre the field,  
                                    Wi' creeping pace. (ll. 73-78)

Line 73 is, syntactically, no more than a suggestion but as he elaborates the stanza it gradually assumes the status of an order, or conspiratorial pledge. "See" (l. 75) captures our attention and directs it to the inevitability of age, characterized by verbs like "hostan", "hirplan", and "creepan". In ll. 79-84 he pursues the argument by a different technique. There, he stresses all the pleasures of youth -- "vacant, careless roamin", "cheerfu' tankards foamin", "social noise", and "dear, deluding woman" -- and waves each farewell as he introduces it. This resembles the cinematic "flashback" technique, and effectively captures the transient, fleeting nature of life's pleasures. It gives added force to his advice in ll. 67-72. Seize them now! Wait, and they will pass you by. The lost glories of youth are recalled nostalgically, as if from the perspective of old age. It is this vantage-point which gives the final two lines of the stanza their poignancy.

Again, within the space of a few stanzas, Burns has altered the tempo and direction of the epistle, from the wild freedom of ll. 61-72 to the sober contemplation of universal human truths in the manner of Gray or Johnson. The fine apostrophe to Life in ll. 85-90 displays Burns's considerable competence in the tradition of contemplative, philosophic verse. It resembles the elaboration of a set of notes in some stately fugue, but is no less a part of the total "entertainment" than the humorous, iconoclastic stanzas. The sombre personification of "Cold-pausing Caution's lesson scorning" (l.87) recalls passages in Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes ..." <sup>44</sup> The precision of "frisk" (l.88) which conveys playfulness and a lamb-like innocence reveals a subtle poetic craftsman. The syllabic pattern of "Young Fancy's rays the hills adorning" (l.86) slows the movement of the verse to the point where it acquires a stately, though never ponderous, tread.

Lines 91-96 describe the resilience of youth under Fate's harsh blows in imagery which has acquired the force of tradition. Burns was equally at ease with the symbols of English tradition, as with Scots. The sentiments of this stanza have a universal application, but in the following two Burns narrows his focus once more to prepare for the return to a consideration of his own situation. With the confident, balanced movement of eighteenth-century reflective verse, he examines, in ll. 97-108, the variety of human situations and the distribution of happiness among mankind. A few find their happiness passively, without toil or sweat, and they have nothing but disdain for the "barren hut". In the following stanza, happiness is gained by those few who "urge the race" and concentrate single-mindedly on one goal to the ex-

<sup>44</sup>See, especially, ll. 141-54 of this poem in The Poems of Samuel Johnson, eds. D.N. Smith and E.L. McAdam (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p.37.

clusion of all else until they reach "some cozie place". In each case, an ultimate happiness is achieved. Each enjoys the delight of some utopia where they can "drink the sweet and eat the fat" (l.99). Burns matches the leisurely pace of ll. 97-102 to the lazy, idyllic situation, and in ll. 103-08 the initially fast movement is slowed to suit the image of secure retirement in the final two lines.

In contrast with this Burns's self-descriptive stanza (ll. 109-14) bursts in on the peaceful scene with a tumbling rush. He immediately gives the force of personal experience to his general observation:

And others, like your humble servan',  
Poor wights! nae rules nor roads observin; (ll. 109-10)

These "Poor wights" know neither the good fortune of those in ll.91-96 nor do they have the concentrated (by which Burns intends, "narrow") vision of those with "steady aim" (l.103). Instead, Burns characterizes their errant, vagabond nature thus:

To right or left, eternal swervin,  
They zig-zag on; (ll. 111-12)

A settled existence is possible only when one is settled in space and time. He is aware, however, of the consequences of this disregard of "rules" and "roads", both of which, he seems to suggest, are artificial, man-made things, but this frank recognition gives his views their force. The dismal picture which he draws of their likely fate is the bottoming-out of another descending emotional graph, comparable to the nadir of stanza ten:

Till curst with Age, obscure an' starvin,  
They aften groan. (ll. 113-14)

This, however, is to look to a gloomy future, and Burns's determinedly optimistic nature will have none of it. "Alas! what bitter toil an' straining --" begins Burns, only to snap his fingers and thumb his nose at the entire "message" of the previous four stanzas, as

if he had written them merely to show that he could excel in that sort of poetry if he chose. His true sympathies lie elsewhere. An entire philosophy of life is compressed into these lines:

Is Fortune's fickle Luna waning?  
E'en let her gang! (ll. 117-18)

The formal need for a short fourth line invites a concise response, and Burns's dismissive phrase swiftly punctures the inflated language of the previous line. He does not stop here, however. Having introduced a prop so blatant as "Fortune's fickle Luna" he is going to use (or, rather, abuse) it to the full, and so employs its fading light as a backcloth to a "Sang". There is, of course, a serious intention here also. The determination to "sing our Sang" (l.120) in the teeth of misfortune is a sentiment which Burns has championed throughout. The companionship, conviviality, and creativity which this action represents are, for him, the great positives which enable one to sustain life against all the odds, and to stress its importance, he indulges in what reads as a piece of melodrama:

My pen I here fling to the door,  
And kneel, ye Pow'rs, and warm implore, (ll. 121-22)

The motivation behind this theatricality resembles that of the second epistle to Lapraik (K58) where, in ll. 31-36, Burns gives a similarly vivid, self-descriptive image because he wishes to demonstrate the value of composition in difficult circumstances. In the above lines, he likewise wants to give the force of direct action to what he has been advocating. Therefore, in the presence of an audience, he kneels and makes a very powerful plea directly to the "Pow'rs", although Smith is also addressed at one remove. The plea, which continues from ll. 123-38, is a forceful piece of writing. Burns uses his skill in capturing the modulations and syntactical variety of the voice to make it effective. The halting repetition in "Grant me but this, I ask no more," (l.125) effectively delays the capping phrase until the final



line, and so stresses that "Ay rowth o' rhymes" is all that Burns wants. This alone will sustain him.

He now launches into a spirited elaboration of this sentiment in ll. 127ff., distributing to others, and denying himself, all the Cockaigne-like luxuries which men desire. He can regard them with equanimity, for has he not tasted the unsurpassable joy of a "rowth o' rhymes". The imperative "Gie" conveys his contempt for "dreeping roasts" and "fine braw claes". If they were truly important, would Burns give them away so readily? His excessive liberality also affirms his belief in the worth of what he has been granted. These two stanzas (ll. 127-38) are marvels of construction and the controlled use of the vernacular. The proverbial phrase in l. 128 and the sneering repetition of "fine" in l. 129 convey a withering contempt. The virtuoso placing of "gie" is superb. In l. 138 it is omitted altogether as Burns sweeps aside the Siren-call of Position, Fame, and Fortune, and asks only "... real, sterling Wit". The pun on "sterling" is used to suggest another and more satisfying kind of wealth to be found in "Wit", one which differs from mere "cent per cent" (l. 136). Lines 137, 138 are both a plea and a statement of fact. Here, Burns re-affirms what he has already declared his belief in -- the power of the creative imagination to overcome hardship and sustain one in the midst of distress.

There is no progression with ll. 139-44. It elaborates what has already been said, as if Burns were determined to illuminate his discovered truth from all possible angles. The process, which is common in Burns's epistolary verse, is reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon poetic technique of "variation" which fixes on a particular element of some virtue or artefact, and stresses its significance by devising synonyms which highlight that aspect. So, too, Burns re-asserts his basic belief and then gives a concrete example of the

ability of creativity to succour and support.

As in stanzas nine and ten, there is an identification of poetry and life. This attitude to poetry is enlarged to assume the proportions of a "modus vivendi". In the closing stanzas, the poet becomes a symbol of the reckless, carefree, vital spirit. This process begins in ll. 139-44 where the poet appears as a passive figure, sustained by the "eau-de-vie" of poetry. It is made explicit in the following stanza as the poet, no longer appealing to "Pow'rs" to keep him "hale", actively defies the clubbing swings of Misfortune and dispels "sorrow, care, and prose" by his rhymes. The image of the frail but "slippery" combatant eluding the "blows" of his much more powerful adversary exemplifies the insolent disregard which Burns recommends as the correct attitude to the trials of life. However, this should not be equated with escapism or retreat into sensual indulgence any more than Christ's preaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Burns's attitude is supported by his recollection of these words:

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? ... Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof (Matthew 7. 25, 34).

He meets Misfortune head-on and scorns the planning and the fearful forethought of those "douse folk" whom he is about to savage:

I jook beneath Misfortune's blows  
As weel's I may; (ll. 147, 8)

He lives for the day and takes the consequences with a Chaplinesque assurance. Like Chaplin, his very existence is a threat to and a denial of propriety, calm, and ordinary unhurried existence:

Sworn foe to sorrow, care, and prose,  
I rhyme away. (ll. 149, 50)

Poetry is here presented as a symbol of that positive, life-giving

spirit which is diametrically opposed to the grim triumvirate named in l. 149. "Sworn foe" suggests that he conceives his opposition as a duty. Poetry is defined, as it was in reality in Mauchline, as an act of defiance against a dull, deadening morality and an affirmation of faith in joy, liberty, and creativity. "I rhyme for fun" is not to be used to excuse poetic bagatelle; it is a serious and deeply-considered attitude to life itself. It points the way to salvation.

In ll. 151ff., the sworn foes meet and clash. Burns employs his "sterling wit" to good effect, slashing and piercing with devastating accuracy. He addresses his opponents and scorns them in the one breath as he reveals how wide is the gulf which separates their attitude and his:

O ye, douse folk, that live by rule,  
Grave, tideless-blooded, calm and cool, (ll. 151, 52)

They live by the rules; Burns refuses to acknowledge their existence. They are phlegmatic, stolid, mechanical; Burns is a wanderer, a reckless sailor, a cocky boxer. These differences of personality are fixed in the epithet, "tideless-blooded". Unlike Burns, who is unafraid of, and at home in, Nature as he wanders "Terra o'er", they know nothing of the ebb-and-flow of the natural world. Their calm is, in fact, stagnation. The pool of their lives is never filled and emptied by rushing tides of emotion. Stasis is death, for it denies the first necessities of life -- movement, energy, activity.

"Compar'd wi' you --" begins Burns, but is forced to break off as he realizes the absurdity of the suggestion:

... How much unlike!  
Your hearts are just a standing pool,  
Your lives, a dyke! (ll. 154, 56)

In these lines Burns elaborates the implications of "tideless-

blooded". The "douse folk" can never know that spontaneous emotional surge and resurge. Instead, they shield themselves behind a protective wall, a "dyke". Theirs is a siege-mentality. They are introverted and wary of emotion. The destructive characterization continues in ll. 157-62, but with musical imagery. They are the faceless, dull plodders, heavy, solemn, and funereal. They never "stray", for they could never be guilty of such inattention to detail as this verb implies. The dull, monotonous tenor of their lives is crystallized in the sound of the final line, "Ye hum away". This recalls the sound of the "busy, grumbling hive" of the epistle to Samson, and, though Burns could obviously not have foreseen it, the single, uninterrupted note is the noise emitted by the ECG machine when the heart stops beating.

In these two stanzas Burns has created a symbol of all that he thought bad and rotten and dead in the human spirit. The comparison between himself as a representative force, and his enemies and their significance, is as stark as a morality play. Good confronts Evil in these lines as if in a parable. He does not castigate individuals, but opposes his action and example to the image of the "douse folk" and the former blots out the latter as the sun does a candle.

Burns's scorn increases as he builds to a crescendo of indignation. Line 163, "Ye are sae grave, nae doubt ye're wise", by its subtle construction, makes the reader respond as he would to the sly inflection of speech. Their wisdom is now in doubt, and this unsettling insinuation undermines the traditional alliance between a sober disposition and wisdom. By reason of this, their disapproval of "The hairum-scarum, ram-stam boys,/ The rattling squad" is demonstrably wrong. However, they remain blissfully unaware that an enemy is within the walls; their sniffy-nosed

confidence in the correctness of their interpretation blinds them to reality. In the sharply-observed detail of "I see ye upward cast your eyes --/-- Ye ken the road --", Burns captures their justifiable outrage at the antics of the "ram-stam boys". The upturned eyeball, appealing to divine witness, reveals their conviction that their standards are God's standards. The stanza's final line, particularly, conveys their smug self-satisfaction, as if, by looking Heaven-ward, they can see the smooth road along which they will inevitably travel. But "road" also stresses the gulf that exists between them and Burns, for it recalls his errant, "stravaigan" nature, as described in 11. 109-12.

The increasing tempo of Burns's attack has raised expectations in the reader of more of this invigorating abuse. However, in a dramatically appropriate final stanza, Burns breaks off abruptly. As in the third epistle to Lapraik, he dismisses his opponents summarily to affirm the positive value of friendship:

Whilst I - but I shall hand me there -  
 Wi' you I'll scarce gang ony where -  
 Then Jamie, I shall say nae mair,  
   But quat my sang,  
 Content with YOU to mak a pair,  
   Whare'er I gang.   (11. 169-74)

This is the peak of Burns's epistolary achievement. It remains unsurpassed in the manipulation of the stanza and the masterly way in which it creates the impression of a speaking voice. The epistle combines English, Scots, and English "tipped" with Scots into a satisfying whole. Burns develops serious ideas, yet never dispels the illusion of a familiar epistle. Poetry such as this is unique in the eighteenth century and represents a significant extension of the epistolary form. Not until Byron is there to be a comparable combination of easy intelligibility, insight, and variety of speech register. This considered statement closes one period in Burns's

life. The following chapter examines the way in which the concerns of his epistolary verse in Mauchline change as a result of changed circumstances; the expression, in epistolary form, of his ideas becomes more varied, but the content is at once less serious and less daring.

### Chapter Three

Between the winter of 1785/86 and November, 1786 when he set out for Edinburgh, Burns wrote epistles which are, in general, characterized by a trivialization of theme, a lessening of the speculative inquiry common to the epistles already studied, and the use of different and varied verse-forms. These changes in his epistolary practice are to be explained by three factors -- the increasing complexity and tempo of Burns's life; his elevation from the status of a farmer with a talent for iconoclastic verse into a widely-recognized public figure; and the change in the status and background of his correspondents.

A brief survey of some of the incidents of Burns's life in the ten months he spent in Mauchline in 1786 will be sufficient to demonstrate how unsettled and uncertain was his existence compared to the comparative calm he had known before. He took the decision to publish his poems; he did public penance for fornication; he contemplated and did make arrangements for emigration to Jamaica; he published and distributed his first edition of poetry; he became the father of twins; he parted, under cloudy circumstances, from another lover, Mary Campbell; he was pursued by Jean Armour's father and had to move from place to place to escape detection. These were hardly ideal conditions for composition and although Burns did write several fine poems during these months (the "Address of Beelzebub" (K108), "The Brigs of Ayr ..." (K120), and a few good epistles), he produced nothing to match the remarkable series which he wrote in 1785.

Different events in this period of his life affected him and his poetry in different ways. The publication of his poems in late July brought him no more trouble than some small inconvenience and the necessity of arranging for the distribution of copies to subscribers.

The affair with Mary Campbell, however, although it remains murky in outline, obviously saddened him deeply and permanently dented his resilient temperament. Of more serious consequence for his epistolary verse was the Jean Armour affair. This demonstrated forcibly his unacceptability to "respectable" Mauchline society, and although this did not worry him unduly the fact of rejection in a tight, claustrophobic community is more difficult to bear than twentieth-century urban Man can realize. The affair also placed him in serious danger of arrest and imprisonment after James Armour issued a detaining writ against the father of his daughter's children. The real importance of the Armour affair, however, lay in its capacity for disillusionment. It proved that "respectable" morality, as Burns had stated in his epistles, was indeed vindictive, rigid, and deadening. Contrary to the aspirations and confident forecasts of those poems, however, it had proved dominant. It was still alive and flourishing, as his humiliating public penance must have revealed. Similarly, his projected emigration must have made the optimistic philosophy of the epistles seem very unreal and bitter. How ironic "I, Rob, am here" must have sounded to a man who knew the very ship on which he was to leave Scotland. In addition, his epistles to Lapraik and Simson had advocated local patriotism in the form of poetic composition, but the message appeared to have fallen on stony ground. Kyle, somehow, had spurned him and a sense of rejection informs his poetic farewell to Ayrshire and to Scotland, "On a Scotch Bard Gone to the West Indies" (K100):

To tremble under Fortune's cummock,  
 On scarce a bellyfu' o' drummock,  
 Wi' his proud, independant stomach,  
   Could ill agree;  
 So, row't his hurdies in a hammock,  
   An' owre the Sea.

.....



Fareweel, my rhyme-composing billie!  
 Your native soil was right ill-willie;  
 But may ye flourish like a lily,  
   Now bonilie!  
 I'll toast ye in my hindmost gillie,  
   Tho' owre the Sea!       (11. 37-42, 55-60)

Yet, after the publication of his poetry he became a local celebrity in a way that must have seemed inconceivable some months before. Robert Heron, who lived nearby when the Kilmarnock edition was issued, testifies to the popularity of his poems: "It is hardly possible to express, with what eager admiration and delight they were every where received . . . Old and young, high and low, grave and gay, learned or ignorant, all were alike delighted, agitated, transported."<sup>1</sup> However, this very prominence had important consequences for his epistolary verse. The decision to publish necessitated caution and implied self-censorship, as is obvious from those poems excluded from the Kilmarnock edition. Significantly, the two poems which had been most popular in his circle and which had caused the greatest outcry among the Orthodox, "The Holy Tulzie" and "Holy Willie's Prayer", were omitted. Of the epistles, those to Goldie and M'Math, his two most controversial epistolary statements on religion in Mauchline, were also omitted. Perhaps the canny printer, Wilson, influenced Burns's decision, or he may have been swayed by the advice of men like Aiken whose first concern, one feels, was for Burns's welfare and not, as one suspects in Gavin Hamilton's case, self-justification or the furthering of a factional cause. Nevertheless, as Burns's position in Mauchline became more public and controversial, he had less wish to antagonize further an already hostile Kirk Session.

His open and increasingly public position as champion of the New Light philosophy and as Public Enemy Number One of the Auld Light Orthodoxy also influenced his epistolary composition. The philosophy

<sup>1</sup>See Monthly Magazine . . . , March 1797, p.216.

of the early epistles, given its highest expression in the epistle to Smith, was formed unsystematically in reaction to local events and the general atmosphere. He rhymed "for fun", and so followed no system, owed allegiance to no one, and wrote neither exclusively for one party nor according to a formula. This fact, and the flexibility of the epistle-form, encouraged the speculative daring and the wide-ranging observation which characterizes the epistles of 1784/5. The moral, philosophical, and (ultimately) political ideals of those epistles were formulated in response to specific pressures and a particular set of unique circumstances. He transformed his personal reaction to the stimuli of Mauchline's events and characters into statements of universal applicability. As spokesman of the New Lights and prime antagonist of Orthodoxy (which was increasingly the role he was forced into by events) he lost that freedom of inquiry and was in danger of becoming narrowly committed. In the early epistles, religious intolerance is but one manifestation of a widespread malaise, and, as such, receives its share of brickbats. As the New Light's poet-in-residence, however, he has but two choices -- the excessive hyperbole of the final stanzas in the epistle to M'Math, or drubbing invective. Both would have narrowed his scope, and neither suited the quixotic tradition of epistolary verse. Such narrow commitment led to epistles like those by Robertson of Strowan, noted in Chapter One. Burns's turn of mind was not primarily abusive and destructive, as was Pope's, for example. His was more visionary, and he chose to reply to his enemies by building alternative systems rather than concentrating on tearing down theirs. As a mere controversialist, he could not have readily written great epistolary poetry.

One of the greatest changes in his epistolary verse, however, is the result of his changed friendships. The early epistles were written to men of a similar background or to fellow-poets. Burns

enlists their help, offers encouragement, and seeks moral support. By 1786, he had, as acquaintances and friends, many middle-class liberals and several professional men. To write epistles to them in the same style as those to Lapraik, or Rankine, or Smith would have been over-familiar. Moreover, he would have been preaching to the converted. They neither needed his example as a spur to emulation, or his declaration of support as a consolation. The epistolary verse written to them retains its urge to entertain and the exhibitionist element remains present, but it lacks the proselytizing urgency and sense of self-discovery which informed his epistles of 1785. One reason for this was, of course, the fact that, by the winter of 1785/6, Burns's ideas and ideals were fully formed. He no longer needed to test them against sympathetic sounding-boards. He had taken the measure of himself and now knew his worth. Those earlier epistles seem to develop with all the power and inevitability of a controlled nuclear reaction. The epistles to be examined in this chapter ought rather to be compared to an elaborate fireworks-display. They are entertaining, inventive, and, at times, fiery, but there is a noticeable reduction in scope and in the gravity of Burns's intention.

"The Inventory" (K86), though it owes much to the tradition of the mock-testament, is, nevertheless, an obvious epistle. It exhibits the same controlled freedom and easy familiarity of earlier epistles and Burns is very much present as a distinctive personality within the poem, now slipping in an autobiographical detail, now cursing a horse, now swearing an oath. There is, too, the same insolent ease of movement, but here from item to item and not, as in the earlier epistles, from idea to idea. At no point does Burns transform his personal experience into a comment on the human condition. He is content to entertain and display virtuoso craftsmanship.

Though subversive in its humorous undermining of bureaucracy, it is a more frivolous epistle than those to the correspondents of 1784 and 1785. Burns wrote the epistle in the same spirit as Picasso might have swiftly sketched a caricature on a menu for a friend; it remains distinctively a Picasso, but it lacks the invigorating insight of, for example, *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

Nevertheless, the poem is skilfully written. The wilfully exhibitionist nature of the verse is a manifestation of Burns's pride in professional craftsmanship and a display of his distinctive talent for the one man who had consistently championed his merits as a poet. The list, which Aiken in his official capacity as surveyor of taxes for Ayr sent to Burns, gave the poet a fresh structure with which he could experiment, and he exploited to the full the opportunities which it offered. After the briefest of introductions in which Burns establishes the "raison d'être" of the poem, he proceeds to the serious business of being funny.

With "Imprimis then" Burns takes a deep breath and launches zestfully into his list. His first lurch against the constricting but flimsy confines of bureaucracy is the result of his misinterpretation of Aiken's terminology. For the more aristocratic "carriage-horses", Burns deliberately misreads "carriage-cattle" and conscientiously presents his correspondent with the earthy details of his plough team. The first horse is described in a wilfully lame, almost self-parodying rhyme:

My \*Lan' afore's a gude auld has been,  
An' wight an' wilfu' a' his days been. (ll. 8,9)

The very lameness of this rhyme is intended to draw the reader's attention to the mechanics of rhyming in such a way that he will appreciate Burns's skill in sustaining this throughout, a habit Burns shares with Byron. The description of the second horse

sidetracks Burns into broadly comic reminiscence which not only avoids the danger of monotony inherent in the fact of the list, but at the same time reveals the poet's irrepressible character and his seemingly unconscious subversive qualities. Burns's garrulous, bawdy recollections in ll. 10-19 are designed to demonstrate the absurdity of the list and its inappropriateness for dealing with life's complexity. Like a man interviewed on a "chat" show on television who is expected only to make his personality subservient to the taste of the audience and the demands of the director, yet who insists on telling long, bawdy stories, so too Burns refuses to be cowed by the list and remains his expansive, awkward, embarrassing self. His distinctive personality is conveyed by several techniques, but most noticeably by idiomatic and colourful speech. "As ever ran afore a tail" (l.25), for example, draws attention to a universal characteristic of horses -- they all run "afore a tail". But, the very fact that this phrasing concentrates one's attention on this aspect of the horse's anatomy invites one irresistibly to consider a horse running behind a tail. "As ever ran afore a tail" stresses the horsiness of a horse, and so conveys, in a distinctively individual manner, the speaker's pride in his animal.

To turn a list into successful poetry is to overcome a considerable technical problem. Burns avoids a monotonous, cataloguing style and draws Aiken's attention to his achievement by the way in which he obviously replies to the list without allowing the epistle to be dominated by this imposed condition. "Imprimis" (firstly) and "Foreby" (secondly) have preceded Burns's replies to Aiken's request thus far, but in line 28 he baldly introduces "Wheel carriages". The effect is as if Burns had been running a finger down the list and in this had encountered the one taxable item which he owned. "Wheel carriages", he says, then scratches his head in the way of all uneducated men confronted with a buff envelope, reflects for a moment,

agrees that he has "Wheel carriages", but, as he explains to the point of absurdity, they are in such poor condition as to be beneath Aiken's notice -- surely!

Wheel carriages I ha'e but few,  
 Three carts, an' twa are feckly new;  
 Ae auld wheelbarrow, mair for token,  
 Ae leg an' baith the trams are broken;  
 I made a poker o' the spin'le,  
 An' my auld mither brunt the trin'le. -- (ll. 28-33)

This passion for exhaustive detail satirizes the bureaucratic mind and betrays the inadequacy of the list as an effective answer to the world. Reality, in the shape of Burns's "auld wheelbarrow" with its minute and troublesome particularity, insists on disrupting the tidy scheme.

Next on the list are "men", and in considering them Burns parodies officialdom's obsession with classification and sub-sections:

For men, I've three mischievous boys,  
 Run de'ils for rantin' an' for noise;  
 A gaudsman ane, a thrasher t'other,  
 Wee Davock hauds the nowt in fother. (ll. 34-37)

He immediately qualifies his first clear statement, and then further sub-divides them according to occupation. The structure and stress of these lines are carefully varied and Burns further dispels the illusion of compiling a list by a digression in which he assures Authority that the welfare of the men is in good hands. The phrase "screed you aff" (l.44) brings Wee Davock, close cousin to John Buchan's Dougal or Wee Jaikie, immediately before the reader as he recites "Effectual Calling" with breathless haste in a desperate race to reach the end before the details disappear from his memory. The pronouns "you" (l.44) and "your" (l.43) are significant. With these touches and with the ironic wish of line 47, "(L--d keep me ay frae a' temptation!)", Burns ensures that Aiken contributes to the poem. Although he is not elaborated as a force within the poem as were Sillar and Lapraik, Burns, as he did in those epistles, writes with

the personality and experience of his correspondent very much in mind.

Thus, the full irony of the situation which Burns describes in ll. 52-53 would be immediately obvious to Aiken. As a result of Betty Paton's pregnancy, Burns has, of all the items specified in Aiken's list, a surplus of the very one he would most readily have foregone:

Wi' weans I'm mair than weel contented,  
Heav'n sent me ane mae than I wanted. (ll. 52,53)

Once again, the list is the stimulus which prompts Burns's distinctive, personal comments. With a complete disregard for bureaucratic requirements, he delivers a particularly appropriate threat as he recalls what he has already "paid" for "dear-bought Bess". Like the irate citizen who threatens to repay Her Majesty's Inspector of Taxes with a cheque written on a cow, Burns threatens the unreal world of forms and lists with an invasion by squalling, squealing life itself in the shape of his illegitimate daughter.

With this Parthian shot, Burns brings the poem to a close. In a humorous coda addressed to Aiken personally, Burns thumbs his nose at the authority of both Church and State. He declares his opposition to their interfering and, ultimately, irrelevant meddling:

Frae this time forth, I do declare,  
I'se ne'er ride horse nor hizzie mair;  
Thro' dirt and dub for life I'll paidle,  
Ere I sae dear pay for a saddle; (ll. 63-66)

His poverty ensures that Aiken's list cannot be applied to him.

Bureaucracy, he implies, cannot cope with the reality of life as he knows it. Once more, his existence has invalidated the rules by which the system functions.

Robert Aiken, to whom "The Inventory" is addressed, was one of a number of professional middle-class men with whom Burns became increasingly intimate in 1786. Such friendships were, one suspects, mutually beneficial. Aiken and Gavin Hamilton saw in Burns a useful

talent in the struggle between Auld Licht and New Licht. Burns doubtless found the fact of friendship with men of their more elevated status proof of abilities he had long suspected he possessed, and a valuable asset when publishing his poetry or when hounded by James Armour. The effects of such a changed set of correspondents have already been noted, and they are readily seen in Burns's short epistle to John Kennedy (K87). Kennedy, factor to the Earl of Dumfries estate at nearby Cumnock, was a kinsman of Gavin Hamilton's wife, Helen Kennedy. He was interested in Burns, but Burns the poet primarily, as their correspondence reveals. Of the letters which survive from the Mauchline period, all contain either an enclosure of a poem by Burns, or some reference to his poetry, and there is suggestive evidence that Kennedy may have sent at least one poetic epistle to Burns.<sup>2</sup> However, despite this mutual interest, Burns's epistle to Kennedy is a cursory and conventional poem when compared with others written out of similar situations. It lacks the self-revelation of the first epistle to Lapraik nor can it boast the passionate conviction of the poem to M'Math, with both of whom, like Kennedy, Burns was corresponding for the first time. Instead, it is much more limited in scope, being little more than an invitation to "bouze".

Although Burns envisages the same utopia of exclusive companionship and hearty conviviality as in the first epistle to Lapraik, the moral dimension of the earlier poem which justified that utopian vision is lacking here. There, Burns's irresistible logic convinced the reader that the values of friendship and "fun" were a necessary response to a harsh and inimical world. Here, Burns speaks as a connoisseur choosing between pleasures. The proposed meeting has no wider significance. It is not the anticipated union of two men committed to one cause, but simply

<sup>2</sup>See F., I, 22-23, 25, 30, 36. In the last reference, Burns's mention of "Your truly facetious epistle" suggests, if not a poem, an entertainer's desire to amuse and provoke.



an opportunity for drinking. However, as an invitation to "bouze", it is certainly competent. As the expert's judgement of stanza one reveals, Burns's is no "hermit's fancy" but that of an aficionado. The contrast between the appreciative smack of "taste" (1.8) and the gluttonous detail of "swallow" (1.13) establishes his character economically. As an alternative to the animal debauchery suggested by "puke an' wallow" (1.14), Burns commands his ideal to appear:

But gie me just a true good fallow  
 Wi' right ingine,  
 And spunkie ance to make us mellow,  
 And then we'll shine. (ll. 15-18)

However, as is usual in the epistles, when the utopia is given form, it is immediately threatened by the appearance of a gloomy spectre. Here, it is "ane of warl's folk" (l. 19). Burns is not seriously suggesting that stanza four is an accurate description of Kennedy's character, as ll. 25-27 clearly state. Instead, the stanza is a rhetorical device designed to make the utopia more attractive by recalling, in essential form, what they are escaping from or opposed to. In the epistles to Lapraik, the image of stanza four would have been elaborated and the evil of this attitude to life stressed. Here, in this lesser poem, Burns simply flashes the picture before his reader as an inducement to drink. The epistle ends with a direct invitation:

Come, Sir, here's tae you:  
 Hae there's my haun', I wiss you weel  
 And Gude be wi' you. (ll. 28-30)

Burns thus realizes the prospect envisaged in ll. 15-18, and Kennedy becomes the "true good fallow" of the utopian vision. The poem which began with the possibility of Kennedy's arrival at "Mauchline Corss" ends with his walking through the door to meet Burns's hand offered in friendship.

Burns's next epistle is likewise an unremarkable production. The "Letter to J[ame]s T[ennan]t, Gl[en]c[onne]r" (K90) flickers into

life only occasionally. It lacks the energy and flamboyant personal and poetic style of earlier epistles. The tone of the epistle is, for long stretches, uniformly flat and resigned and the development halting and unconnected. This is the more unusual when one reflects that Burns was writing to a local man, only slightly his elder, who was more his social equal than correspondents such as Aiken, Kennedy or Hamilton. James Tennant was a miller in Ochiltree and the son of the philoprogenitive John Tennant of Glenconner who, as did Lapraik, assumed the role of father in Burns's life. He was to advise Burns to accept the farm of Ellisland in Dumfries, and Burns always speaks of him with affection and respect.

The epistle opens promisingly as, with customary economy, Burns establishes that aspect of Tennant's character which links him to the poet and makes him the appropriate recipient for this epistle:

Auld com'rade dear and brither sinner,  
How's a' the folk about Gl--nc--r; (ll. 1,2)

The broad masculinity, hinted at here, is developed with sly humour as Burns adopts a suitably barrack-room tone for this sharer in his riots:

For me my faculties are frozen,  
My dearest member nearly dozen'd: (ll. 5,6)

The end to which this description of the weather is put in this epistle ought to be compared with similar descriptions in the epistles to Sillar and Lapraik. There, it was used to place Burns and his correspondent in a similar situation in order that the philosophy developed in the body of the epistle might be seen to be equally relevant for both men. Here, it is merely an original and entertaining variation on the usual matter of a familiar letter. This compulsion to entertain becomes the predominant characteristic of Burns's epistolary verse in Mauchline in 1786. Increasingly, the fact of an audience is the element which controls the development of an epistle. Less and less is the epistle used to convey Burns's personal reaction to, or view of, the world, partly because he had stated that already in a fully-developed form, and partly also because cir-

cumstances forced him to question its validity. Here, however, for thirty lines, Burns describes his mental and physical condition with quirky humour. Lines 7 to 30 are in the English tradition of comic narrative, as typified by the verse of Gay and Prior, or, in Scotland, by the expansive couplets of Ramsay. The verse flows evenly and easily, but such a metrical scheme cannot offer the same complexity of rhythmical effect as "Standart Habby". Burns is here experimenting with a form which is appropriate to this more introspective monologue, but he is not entirely successful, as the drear catalogue of good wishes in ll. 31-65 reveals.

The slow movement of the verse matches the boredom of the farmer during the lean Winter months as he awaits the quickened pace of life that comes with Spring. Burns's life is at a low ebb; he is reduced to reading devotional literature:

For now I'm grown sae cursed douse,  
I pray an' ponder butt the house,  
My shins, my lane, I there sit roastin,  
Perusing Bunyan, Brown and Boston; (ll. 19-22)

The precision of "ponder" and "Perusing" reflects his dull condition, but the sharp plosives of the last line express his impatience with that grim literary triumvirate. With ironic exaggeration, Burns hints at the possibility of his becoming "A burning an' a shining light" (l.30) on this exclusive diet and captures, in the ludicrous yet precise image of the dying "Pyet", that heavenward roll of the eyes which typifies "real Gospel" behaviour. In earlier epistles such as that to Rankine, Burns includes, though in a more extended narrative form, similar passages of self-description as the living proof that his philosophy is valid. In those poems, his presence is the justification of his ideals. Here, personal details are introduced as part of the total entertainment. Burns invites his correspondent to compare his knowledge of Burns's character with the ironic image Burns projects. Self-description now

takes the less important form of in-jokes, asides intended to provoke a guffaw from the audience. This was true of ll. 45,46 of "The Inventory" and applies here also to ll. 19-22. It marks a significant reduction in the scope of Burns's epistolary verse.

There is one reason other than winter inactivity for the less ebullient tone of this epistle. It has about it an air of world-weariness which receives fuller statement in the extempore epistle to Gavin Hamilton (K99). Here, it is most apparent in the lines on Smith and Reid:

Philosophers have fought an' wrangled,  
An' meikle Greek an' Latin mangled,  
Till with their Logic-jargon tir'd,  
An' in the depth of science mir'd,  
To common sense they now appeal,  
What wibes an' wabsters see an' feel; (ll. 11-16)

The resignation with which Burns states his conclusion here is expressive of his mood in 1786. In lines 61 to 78 of the first epistle to Lapraik, he had already discovered intuitively and stated the essence of the philosophies which he attributes here to Smith and Reid. What satisfaction could there be, however, in having one of the central tenets of his philosophy confirmed by weighty authority, when he occupied in Mauchline such a lowly position? His reading in these Scottish philosophers confirms what the Armour affair was to teach him. He knew instinctively that the philosophy of his epistles was just, yet local events seem to have conspired to deny him the recognition of his insight. The Auld Licht philosophy remained powerful and secure. His position in Mauchline increasingly resembled that which he had ascribed to Fergusson in Edinburgh in lines 19-24 of the epistle to Simson -- that of a prophet without honour in his own country.

The preliminary monologue is more successful than the second part of the epistle but it is no more than competent. Burns is unable to establish a convincing, conversational tone with which to project a

distinctive personality. Rarely is there the sense of a voice speaking. This is a crippling defect, for his finest epistolary poems are those in which the verse reads like varied, idiosyncratic speech with all its changes of mood, tone, and direction. Moreover, such an overwhelming sense of the spoken word is one means whereby Burns defines himself as a character in the epistle. His failure to do this in the epistle to Tennant cannot be explained simply by the fact that Burns was writing his epistle in couplets. "The Inventory" successfully captures this variety of living speech, as a comparison of Burns's farewell in each poem reveals. Neither passage shows Burns at his best, but apart from the jarring repetition of "put" in lines 71, 72 of the passage from "The Inventory", lines 65-72 of that epistle are more natural and carefully constructed than the corresponding lines 66-71 of the epistle to Tennant. In it, the syntax of line 67 is contorted to no end save rhyming necessity, "just" is included merely to pad out line 69, and the language is flat and dull.

Technical failures such as these are obvious throughout lines 31-71. The uniformity of line-length in lines 31-36 weakens a passage which is badly in need of a restorative. The poem has none of the sweep of earlier epistles. It is episodic and "bitty". Burns appears to have been unconcerned about linking one passage to another, as he checks off a list of those whom he was obliged to praise. His sole concern in lines 31-71 is to ensure that each member of the numerous family is included and given some form of individual citation. This, however, leads to the dismal banality of lines like these:

An' no forgetting wabster Charlie,  
I'm tauld he offers very fairly, (ll. 44-45)

Not one member of Tennant's family comes alive as did, for example, Wee Davock who receives similarly brief mention in "The Inventory"; and none is felt as a presence in the poem as were Smith or Rankine. Although

Burns devotes more space to his correspondent's character, the good wishes of lines 62-65 are mere heartiness. The important consequences of such an attitude to life are never elaborated, as in the lengthier, more profound epistles; nor is it given the recommendation of personal experience, nor championed as the triumphant alternative to the dead hand of greed or hypocrisy. It is simply a conventional tag expressing good cheer. This is the ultimate reason for one's dissatisfaction with this epistle. It is different in kind from the epistles of 1784 and 1785. In those, Burns himself figured largely and his presence was essential. His enthusiasm, his example, his symbolic experience, and, above all, his voice gave the ideas and beliefs expressed their force and their importance. Here, he writes on an altogether different level. The poem is merely complimentary with none of the urgency and little of the self-dramatization of greater epistles. Had the epistle been addressed to "Jamie" himself, it might have rivalled those poems, but Burns obviously intended the epistle for the whole of Tennant's large family. To flatter them all dutifully was easily within his powers, but there was, consequently, little scope for his quixotic personality in such conventional verse. One feels that the epistle was exacted and not sent willingly.

"Extempore -- to Mr. Gavin Hamilton" (K99) was written by Burns at some point during the hectic Spring of 1786 when there seemed to be little in Ayrshire to hold him. It is quite unlike any epistle Burns had written before in respect of its form and its philosophical viewpoint. The rhythmical, chant-like repetition of "naething" strikes a note of despair which is out of character, but the epistle is, in fact, neither nihilistic nor oppressively gloomy, as will become clear when it is examined in the context of Burns's life in Mauchline at this time and in the light of his friendship with Gavin Hamilton.

Despite what the evidence may now suggest of the relationship

between Hamilton and Burns, the latter, as has already been noted, had then no doubt of the genuineness of their friendship. Hamilton had proved a friend to the Burns family by subletting Mossgiel to the two brothers in 1784; he had introduced Burns to influential friends in Ayrshire; had urged him to publish his poetry; and he had become for Burns, by reason of his arguments with the Kirk Session, a representative figure of persecuted honesty. At one level, therefore, the poem is an exercise in justification. To the one man whose friendship and support he valued above others', Burns tries to explain away his seemingly aimless and (as it must have appeared to him when contemplating emigration to Jamaica) inconclusive existence. He suggests, by way of vindication, that the goals which fire ambitious men are, ultimately, futile:

Ne'er scorn a poor Poet like me,  
For idly just living and breathing,  
While people of every degree  
Are busy employed about -- naething. -- (ll. 5-8)

The poem is also strongly influenced by the events surrounding his relationship with Jean Armour. This epistle is one more record of the disillusionment and bewilderment which Burns experienced when the girl's family acted as they did. The cynicism of lines 21-24 is the next inevitable emotional reaction after the shocked anger of his prose letter to the same correspondent:

Apropos, old Mr. Armour prevailed with him to mutilate that unlucky paper, yesterday. -- Would you believe it? tho' I had not a hope, nor even a wish, to make her mine after her damnable conduct; yet when he told me, the names were all cut out of the paper, my heart died within me, and he cut my very veins with the news. -- Perdition seize her falsehood and perjurious perfidy! but God bless her and forgive my poor, once-dear, misguided girl. -- She is ill-advised. -- 3

A third factor makes its influence felt throughout the poem, though it is less easy to define. In this epistle, as in "On a Scotch Bard Gone to the West Indies" (K100), there is a sense of deep disappointment, a feeling that, in some way which he hesitates to state

<sup>3</sup>See F., I, 24.

precisely, he has been cheated and cozened. As it finds expression in this poem, the realization amounts at times to a personal hurt, especially in such stanzas as these:

The Poet may jingle and rhyme,  
 In hopes of a laureate wreathing,  
 And when he has wasted his tune,  
 He's kindly rewarded with naething. --

.....

And now I must mount on the wave,  
 My voyage perhaps there is death in;  
 But what of a watery grave!  
 The drowning a Poet is naething. -- (ll. 25-28, 45-48)

This final line represents Burns's ironic adaptation of the conventional attitude of his enemies -- the departure and possible death of a troublesome poet will not worry them -- but it also reveals his appreciation of the paradox that it is only when one is held in so little regard that one can view the world with the insouciant contempt which such an uncertain, unsubstantial creation deserves. This interpretation explains such an image as that in lines 29-32 where, unlike those other symbols of expectation not fulfilled, the "lover" (ll. 21-24) and the "Poet" (ll. 25-28), there can be no personal reference. "The thundering bully" is introduced to demonstrate the manifest absurdity of the world. The lover is disappointed, the Poet disillusioned, and the bully mere empty show. The "feminine whig" is equally bogus, melting at the first touch of Burns's charm; and the Priest's "anathemas" are not so terrifying after all.

Burns closes the epistle with a fitting bequest of friendship to Hamilton:

And now as grim death's on my thought,  
 To you, Sir, I make this bequeathing:  
 My service as lang as ye've ought,  
 And my friendship, by G--, when ye've naething. -- (ll. 49-52)

These lines comprise the one valid, substantial truth in the entire poem. This offer will not be withdrawn or prove false on closer inspection.



Burns leaves Hamilton all that he has and the only thing of value in the poem. As in a legal "testament", what precedes the bequest is Burns's demonstration that he is "of sound mind". His perception of what is petty and worthless, like greed and faction, or uncertain, like fame, is eminently sane. True friendship is offered as the one force which has some permanence and validity.

This affirmative climax has been achieved by Burns's skilled manipulation of large and small units of meaning. His criticism of earthly vanity gains added weight by his use of type-figures like the lover, the poet, and the courtier. These imply that folly and uncertainty are universal, and so give his contrasting stance, "Never scorn a poor Poet like me,/ For idly just living and breathing" (ll. 5,6), a symbolic significance also as a valid alternative. The skill which Burns demonstrates in these epistles of 1786 is "flashier" than that of earlier epistles where it was subordinated to the total impact. Here, as in "The Inventory", Burns flaunts his technique by taking risks. In that epistle to Aiken he set himself the task of turning a tax-return into verse; here, he imposes on himself the condition of ending each verse with "naething", yet at the same time avoiding artificiality. He succeeds because of his skill in "turning" the stanzas. He creates an expectation by his construction of the first two, or three lines, and then overturns it or denies the reader the conclusion he had anticipated. This formal device mirrors the intellectual basis of the poem; namely, the uncertain, insubstantial, freakish nature of the world and Man's fate. In stanza four, for example, the volte-face is delayed until the final, crushing "naething", given scornfully in answer to an equally scornful question. In stanzas six, seven, and eight the pattern is the same: the characteristic behaviour and hopes of three type-figures

is given in the first two lines, only to be mocked in the contrasting second half of the verse. In stanza ten, the reversal of what has gone before is delayed until the final word, and in stanza eleven, "naething" again reverses one's anticipations, but this time in a triumphant way, unlike the previous stanzas where it was used dismissively and negatively.

The pattern of scrutiny and rejection which is the basis of each stanza reflects one prominent aspect of Burns's shifting emotional state in the Summer of 1786. However, his refusal to concede the importance of those actions which others regarded as significant is allied to the earlier epistles. A similarly jaundiced view of conventional desires and ambitions is behind his frequently expressed wish for the vagabond life, and the dismissive attitude to rank and faction is drawn ultimately from those self-sufficient and exclusive Masonic catches with which Burns was familiar. Nevertheless, although this poem shares certain features with the epistles of 1784 and 1785, -- the assertion of friendship as the one substantial fact in a shifting world, the sly humour of the epistle with "Her whigship", and the jokes which rely for effect on a shrewd appraisal of the recipient's character -- the emotional curve of this poem is consistently downwards. The poem may end positively, but it is the preceding negatives which one remembers.

If this epistle to Gavin Hamilton represents one reaction by Burns to the events of 1786, then his second to Sillar (K101) complements it by recording the escapist philosophy in which Burns also sought solace. Together, the two epistles match exactly the ambivalent and confused emotional whirl of his letter to David Brice:

I have tryed often to forget her: I have run into all kinds of dissipation and riot, Mason-meetings, drinking matches, and other mischief, to drive her out of my head, but all in vain: and now for a grand cure: the Ship is on her way home that is to take me out to Jamaica; and then, farewell dear old Scotland, and farewell dear, ungrateful Jean, for never, never will I see you more!<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>See Burns's letter of 12 June, 1786 in F., I, 31.

The outlook of the epistle to Sillar is consistently optimistic, as if Burns were determined to convince not only Sillar but also himself that poetry could restore the spirit. The epistle has an almost-missionary zeal as if, in Sillar, Burns was determined to leave behind one seed from which the new local poetry could spring. He writes as the skilful propagandist who knows when to shame his audience into action, and when to inspire by painting in bold, inviting colours.

An example of the latter technique is the energetic description of the "Bardie clan" (l.26). The military image suggests loyalty to an ideal and small-group cohesion, but Burns's persuasive power is reserved for the carefully-constructed stanza six:

Nae thought, nae view, nae scheme o' livin',  
 Nae cares tae gie us joy or grievin':  
 But just the pouchie put the nieve in,  
                                   An' while ought's there,  
 Then, hiltie, skiltie, we gae scrivin',  
                                   An' fash nae mair. (ll. 31-36)

The succession of negatives in the first two lines conveys the anti-authority stance of the poets, just as the abandoned, fragmented syntax of the remaining four captures their vital determination to live for the day. Stanza three, however, attacks on another front, wrestling with the recalcitrant poet as a priest would with a backsliding soul. There is a Jesuitical subtlety about this stanza. In tones of shocked regret, Burns recounts the rumours he has heard; the end-stopped lines convey his hesitant reluctance to believe them. He then resorts to threats, as if angry to see a good man spoil his life in this way. (Sillar, it must be remembered, was now established in business in Irvine, and this was, for Burns in his determinedly escapist mood of the letter to Brice, a fate worse than death.) Perhaps all that is required is a short, sharp blow to bring him to his senses. This attitude is justified by the flattery of the two final lines. Sillar is too valuable to lose.

Ideas of struggle and small-group values dominate the poem. Not only will Sillar derive comfort and pleasure from composition but he has a duty to his fellow-poets and, the implication is, to Ayrshire and to mankind, although this remains unstated and is to be deduced by Sillar only from the evidence of the earlier epistle which he received. As in those epistles of 1784 and 1785, poets and those who share the poetic spirit have insights which are denied to others. However, whereas before the urgency of Burns's discovery led him to the conviction that poets should therefore be the law-givers and should therefore revolutionize society, here they are accorded no such active social or political role. They are saintly fools -- "They never think". (1.30). Burns's use of "think" in this poem is as subtly varied as his use of "bless" in the first epistle to Sillar. Burns's thinking, as he makes clear in lines 23, 24, is confined to rueful contemplation after enjoyment. How much better to be one of those "thoughtless sons o' man", where the adjective has the sense of carefree or reckless; they have no "thought" ("for the morrow", one adds inevitably, and this deliberate recollection of the epistle to Smith is the only point at which the epistle expands into more profound areas.) They are not the careful, calculating, profit-and-loss beings whom Burns has attacked so often in the epistles, but recall instead the "Commoners of air" of the first epistle to Sillar.

Nostalgic recollection of shared experiences on the eve of his departure will explain much of this epistle which is probably not complete, as printed from Sillar's edition of poems.<sup>5</sup> However, the urgency of the epistle and the determination with which Burns seeks to

<sup>5</sup>The references in stanza four and the wishes of lines 7, 8 (which are identical to those of the epistle to Logan (K129) would seem to fix the date as the summer of 1786. It is, however, highly unlikely that Burns could write to a man who had been a close friend and say nothing of his projected emigration.

convince Sillar of the need to write poetry also imply that Burns feared another disappointment here. As he prepared to leave Ayrshire, he could leave behind only an illegitimate child, the hostility of a large section of Mauchline's population, and little else. This sense of waste compels him to make one final attempt to leave more tangible proof of his existence, and so he leaves Sillar this example as a spur:

For me, I'm on Parnassus brink,  
Rivan the words tae gar them clink;  
Whyles daez't wi' love, whyles daez't wi' drink,  
                  Wi' jads or masons;  
An' whyles, but ay owre late, I think  
                  Braw sober lessons. (ll. 19-24)

Here, perhaps, and not in Edinburgh does the Burns myth begin, and it is of his own making. In earlier epistles, Burns had believed that the role of the poet in society was important, and had sought to convince others of its relevance. One now feels that the man who is most in need of conviction is Burns himself.

If this is a forerunner of what was to happen to Burns's epistolary poetry in Edinburgh, the next poem is more so. "To Mr. Gavin Hamilton, Mauchline" (K102) is no more than a poetic bagatelle which Burns the convivial mason and clubman had early learned to throw off with ease. This kind of verse could equally well take the form of a mock-epitaph, or a satirical epigram, or the dedication in a book which he was presenting. It has in common with the epistles to Aiken and Hamilton a "tricksy" technical expertise. Here, Burns is versifying a letter, not writing an epistle. Burns the poet is pleasing his friends. When the audience to be entertained were local friends like Hamilton and Kennedy, then Burns's talent did not necessarily undergo that degradation which it would in Edinburgh. There, he was to entertain and justify his position as poet by fulfilling an alien audience's conception of poetry and poets. The fact of a Mauchline audience might determine the nature of an epistle, but in such a way that it need not

prevent Burns from remaining true to himself. This could not be so in Edinburgh, however.

Although Burns denies in lines 39-42 that he is flattering Gavin Hamilton, the self-descriptive epithets, "LAUREAT" and "MINSTREL BURNS" would appear to confute this by giving him the status of a servant at the New Licht Court or the follower of their most valiant champion. They suggest a subservient relationship with Hamilton. This, however, will not bear scrutiny. Apart from "Extempore ... " (K99), Hamilton appears in Burns's poetry as a typical or representative figure. Burns neither describes, nor addresses his epistles to, Gavin Hamilton, but to that man whose stand against the Kirk Session had made him a symbol of those ideals of honesty, virtue, and benevolence which Burns had advocated consistently in the Mauchline epistles of 1784 and 1785. It is in this role that he appears in the epistle to M'Math and it is for this reason that Burns addresses "A Dedication ... " (K103) to him. Though Hamilton's name is never printed in full in the Kilmarnock edition where the poem first appeared, the identity of the recipient would have been obvious to all in Mauchline and many beyond. This fact is essential, for it explains the curious and complex nature of this unusual "Dedication". The poem is, in fact, not so much a "Dedication" as an "Epistle dedicatory", for it matches other familiar epistolary verse in its invigorating blend of the personal and the universal, the serious and the trivial. Burns's distinctive voice is heard as he affirms and denies, attacks and celebrates, now concentrating (apparently) on Hamilton, now veering off to land a few swift blows on his opponents.

Because of the circumstances of its publication, Burns knew that the poem would reach a wider audience than Gavin Hamilton, and, therefore, have a more public significance than could have been anticipated for a mere familiar epistle. In "A Dedication ... ", Burns openly

aligns himself with an embattled and controversial figure who was then in the midst of a protracted and bitter conflict with the Kirk Session. By choosing Hamilton as the fittest man to receive this poem and comparing his collection of poems to "... something like yours", Burns was stating in public the subversive and iconoclastic quality of his poetry. Moreover, since he was assured of a public forum after having decided to include this epistle in the Kilmarnock edition, Burns is also taking this opportunity to "set the record straight" before he leaves Scotland. In this final appearance in his local region, Burns attempts many things. He settles old scores, attempts to give his definitive performance, seeks to repay debts, to outline his ideal relationship, and, at the same time, to leave behind an honest account which would justify his past behaviour and insist that his ideas still were relevant. Burns writes here more purposefully than in earlier epistles. There, one sensed an element of self-discovery as Burns wrote. To use a boxing analogy, Burns set out to attack and, ultimately, to win, but he did so with a flamboyant, amused display which did not always go for the quick knockout. Here, however, he seems to be fighting his last contest before a compulsory retirement. He wishes to be remembered, above all, as a winner, and so his blows are carefully placed and thrown with measured strength. The expression of the verse is under tight control, and Burns seems to anticipate all that happens in the poem. The epistle is, ultimately, a cold and calculated performance, in spite of revealing asides. We watch, but we are not swept by the rush and sweep of his exhibition.

For a "Dedication", the poem opens abruptly and unconventionally. Burns will not flatter Gavin Hamilton in the usual style of such verse. Instead, he boasts of his independence, and parodies the eagerness with which the servile flatterer clutches at the mere accident of a name in

the hope of turning it to advantage in a compliment:

Expect na, Sir, in this narration,  
 A fleechan, fleth'ran Dedication,  
 To roose you up, an' ca' you guid,  
 An' sprung o' great an' noble bluid;  
 Because ye're sirnam'd like His Grace,  
 Perhaps related to the race: (11. 1-6)

Burns's "hard-nosed" tone cuts through the conventions of dedicatory verse to expose it as a sham, shoddy business. Besides, why should he flatter? It is a mark of his independence that he need not rely on "Great-folk for a wamefou", and he stresses his unique position by the subtle use of auxiliary verbs. The transition from "may do" to "maun do" in line 11 gives his speculative characterization of the flatterer in lines 1-10 the weight of fact, whereas the contrast of "maun do" and "can plough" (1.14) insists on Burns's viable independence. Then, with that desire for clarity and a plain record of the truth which characterizes the epistle, Burns leaves no room for doubt:

And when I downa yoke a naig,  
 Then, LORD be thanket, I can beg; (11. 15,16)

Liberty and truth to himself are his most cherished possessions. Once more, the beggar represents freedom from restrictions and proud self-sufficiency. The purpose of this introductory section is twofold. Firstly, it demonstrates that Burns does not write to win favour. Hamilton, rather, has deserved the epistle. Secondly, Burns uses the epistle as a means of defining himself, of restructuring a credible image to present to the world. This had always been one of the attractions of the epistolary form, in that it allowed Burns to develop different aspects of his personality. Here, however, and in certain epistles of the Edinburgh and Dumfries periods, he uses the epistle as therapy. With it, he presents to his audience an image of himself which he needed to have accepted.



These two aims come together in the relationship he describes between himself and Hamilton -- "Sae I shall say, an' that's nae flatt'rin,/ It is just sic Poet an' sic Patron." (ll. 17,18). The expansion of these two figures is Burns's concern in the remainder of the epistle. In the verse-paragraphs which follow, Burns creates an unrepentant and defiant image of himself as poet, and balances this with a correspondingly challenging portrait of Hamilton as patron. The four-line description of the poet (lines 19-22) is optimistic and undaunted. In spite of the events in Mauchline which had resulted in his projected emigration, Burns is determined to appear unbowed in public. This persona, with which he will confront the world, is sustained throughout the poem by the flippant, unsurprised, tone of the epistle, for which the couplet here proves a very effective verse-form. It allows Burns to make sudden contrasts in attitude and expectation, and permits him to form damning lists of condemnation. Further evidence of his desire to state the truth fearlessly is his open satire on Orthodoxy, although, in this context, his concern to "set the record straight", leads him to "overkill".

His second purpose throughout is to present Gavin Hamilton as a representative figure in such a way that the image will both anger his opponents and effectively define the concerns of Burns's poetry. He begins this process with the description of the "Patron" which balances that of the "Poet". With asides which confirm his determination to indulge in no undeserved flattery, Burns builds as if to a climax, only to pull back in the final line:

On ev'ry hand it will allow'd be,  
He's just -- nae better than he should be. (ll. 25,26)

From this innocent and platitudinous phrase, Burns launches his ironic and open attack on Auld Licht beliefs, and especially on the idea that

a narrow sectarianism is the true route to salvation. From lines 27-35, he lists the virtues which make Hamilton such a figure of respect, but does so with a grudging, "that's-all-very-well-but" manner:

I readily and freely grant,  
 He downa see a poor man want;  
 What's no his ain, he winna tak it;  
 What ance he says, he winna break it; (ll. 27-30)

Burns singles out for praise in Hamilton those specific virtues which, as a result of the allegations of the Kirk Session, had been called in question, another example of Burns's defiant appeal to the local audience. Yet one remains puzzled by the concessive tone. "I readily and freely grant" awaits the complementary "But" or "Nevertheless", and this is supplied in the next unit of muscular verse. The "Patron" deserves no praise for his virtues because they are practised " ... no through terror of D-mn-t-n:/ It's just a carnal inclination" (ll. 47,48). He is, in fact, as naive and uneducated as " ... Hunters wild on Ponotaxi,/ Wha never heard of Orth-d-xy". (ll. 43,44) about the motives behind his benevolence. The ironic voice here sounds like that of a bored teacher explaining to a particularly dense class, but this patient, if weary, statement of the "obvious" soon gives way to the bitter, concentrated attack on the contrast between "Morality", " ... a milder feature,/ Of our poor, sinfu', corrupt Nature", and "sound believing".

In lines 49-52, Burns becomes the hell-fire preacher, thundering out the terrible dangers of "Morality". That way lies eternal damnation:

Morality, thou deadly bane,  
 Thy tens o' thousands thou hast slain!  
 Vain is his hope, whase stay an' trust is,  
 In moral Mercy, Truth and Justice! (ll. 49-52)

The placing of "Vain" catches exactly the sorrowing denunciation of the Auld Licht minister and the reference to the "deadly bane" recalls the bloody, vengeful God of the Sampson story. In lines 53-60, Burns

supplies the alternative. "No -- " prepares us for the corrective decree, but this is delayed until line 60, " -- stick to sound believing". In the interval, however, Burns's quick-fire rules of conduct, barked out with dazzling rapidity, effectively define the delayed conclusion with the result that the passage reads less like a series of commands than a catalogue of damning description. The alternative to "Morality" excuses greed, permits callous inhumanity, and encourages the money-grubbing ethic. In a bitter coda, Burns gives his "Rules for the Would-Be Orthodox", and describes their system as one of hypocritical deceit designed to cover such activities with a mask of seeming propriety and sanctity:

Learn three-mile pray'rs, an' half-mile graces,  
 Wi' weel spread looves, an' lang, wry faces;  
 Grunt up a solemn, lengthen'd groan,  
 And damn a' Parties but your own; (ll. 61-65)

With each new command, Burns strips away another layer of the protective clothing worn like a second skin by the Orthodox.

However, Burns's anger at this point is such that he overbalances as he swings at his enemies, and makes an error of poetic judgement. His scathing irony had already effectively destroyed, in terms of the control of emotional response within the poem, any validity that the Orthodox doctrines may have had. As a result, the assumption of his opponents' strident and melodramatic voice jars. The threats of lines 67-77 fall flat. The idea of defending such an ethic has been made too absurd for this to sound convincing and, therefore, funny.

With sly and exaggerated politeness, Burns returns to his "Dedication". The ambiguity in lines 80, 81, "But when Divinity comes cross me./ My readers still are sure to lose me", is typical of his subtle control of voice in this epistle -- his "readers" were literally about to lose Burns to Jamaica. To those in Mauchline who could hear,

this "Dedication" was, in fact, a challenging personal statement. With the choice of Hamilton as a suitable recipient at this central point in the poem, Burns stresses the revolutionary, anti-authority nature of his verse and, at the same time, throws a final punch at the Auld Lights by reminding them of their past failures:

So Sir, you see 'twas nae daft vapour,  
 But I maturely thought it proper,  
 When a' my works I did review,  
 To dedicate them, Sir, to You:  
 Because (ye need na tak it ill)  
 I thought them something like yoursel. (ll. 82-87)

Burns closes the poem with challenging praise of Hamilton because he represents a valid alternative to the Auld Lights. This encomium springs from gratitude but, within the arena of the poem, it also forms, by implication, a condemnation of Orthodoxy. This explains the reference to "each poor man's pray'r" -- Burns seems to speak for his class regarding Hamilton's probity as administrator of the "stent" -- and the humorously familiar detail of "nuptial labours". "Five bonie Lasses" and "sev'n braw fellows" are symbols of the hope for change in a new generation.

In stark contrast to this blissful picture, Burns balances it with the grim scene visualized in ll. 119ff. Their relationship, however, is proof against changes in fortune. With a more stately verse than he uses in the rest of the epistle, Burns re-affirms his position in language which owes much to the traditional literature of friendship. One must not mistake this conventional element for insincerity. Burns is, by this means, defining an ideal and also paying a tribute. He was ready to accept, from Hamilton, the relationship of "Patron" and "Poet" precisely because the phrase, "my FRIEND and BROTHER" (l. 134) was an accurate description of the intimate fellowship between the two men.

At first sight, the "Epistle to a Young Friend" (K105) is quite unlike any of Burns's earlier epistolary verse. It is sober and cautious where they are abandoned; worldly where they are visionary; linguistically conservative where they are often innovative and daring. However, there is one important factor linking this epistle with those to Lapraik and Simson. Here, too, Burns insists on the representative value of one man's life and experience. One's behaviour in the world can have significance for others. Man's life is a series of tests or challenges, and one's response can be symbolic.

This epistle is written for Andrew Aiken, the youthful son of Robert Aiken whose intimacy with and concern for Burns has been noted above. In this poem, Burns uses his own situation to give credence, by the force of experience, to his advice. The tone swings from the exhortatory to the confident statement of one whose insight is the result of wide and often bitter experience. The first half of a stanza offering advice will be capped by lines which justify such counsel. This process of justification by reference to one's own experience would be insufferably pompous were it not for the way in which Burns establishes an atmosphere of modest, avuncular affection at the outset. Moreover, he is consciously writing within the eighteenth-century tradition of moral didacticism. In epistolary poetry in Scots, there was the example, already noted, of Alexander Nicol (p. 41), but Burns's sources are much wider than the native, epistolary tradition. The advice offered here is that of more worldly Polonius, and one can also hear echoes of essayists like Goldsmith or Addison, to say nothing of Chesterfield.<sup>6</sup> Though Burns's

<sup>6</sup> Compare with Burns's stanza five the shrewd insight of this advice from Lord Chesterfield: "Carry with you, and welcome, into company all the gaiety and spirits, but as little of the giddiness of youth as you can. The former will charm, but the latter will often, though innocently, implacably offend. From Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son (London: Dent, 1929), p.79.

judgement of men was needle-sharp he had, as yet, little personal knowledge of the kind of worldly, sophisticated situations about which he so confidently offers advice here. The epistle is underpinned by his insight, but the exemplary parables are drawn from Burns's reading. If the poem is read in the context of this literary tradition, charges of hypocrisy and inconsistency lose much of their force just as, in "A Dedication ...", or the epistle to M'Math, it should be remembered that it is not Gavin Hamilton the man with whom Burns is concerned, but a figure in the tradition of Pope's Man of Ross and, ultimately, the Christian martyrs.

However, one can legitimately question the effect which the knowledge that he was writing for the son of an influential friend had on the epistle. Does this alone explain the different nature of the advice offered here and the actions proposed in the epistle to Smith:

But why, o' Death, begin a tale?  
 Just now we're living sound an' hale;  
 Then top and maintop croud the sail,  
                                   Heave Care o'er-side!  
 And large, before Enjoyment's gale,  
                                   Let's tak the tide. (ll. 61-66)

The answer cannot be dogmatic. It is probable that the appreciation of his audience restrained Burns. To some extent, he writes in a way that will please those who have invested a large share of their local reputation in him, and this tendency is a forewarning of the malign influence which the taste of his Edinburgh audience was to have on Burns's epistolary composition. Certain stanzas sound as if they are the efforts of a sharp accountant concerned to present a favourable balance-sheet to those who have entrusted him with risk capital. To counteract this impression of calculation one must compare the letters which Burns was to write in response to requests for advice from his youngest brother, William, when he, too, was beginning to

make his way in the world. This passage from a letter of 10th February, 1790 (F., II, 10,11) is typical:

One or two things allow me to particularize to you -- London swarms with worthless wretches who prey on their fellow-creatures' thoughtlessness or inexperience. -- Be cautious in forming connections with comrades and companions. -- You can be pretty good company to yourself, & you cannot be too shy of letting any body know you farther than to know you as a Sadler. -- Another caution; I give you great credit for your sobriety with respect to that universal vice, Bad Women. -- It is an impulse the hardest to be restrained, but if once a man accustoms himself to gratifications of that impulse, it is then nearly, or altogether impossible to restrain it. --

Here, with no audience to play to, and in tones of honest concern, Burns writes in exactly the same spirit as in the epistle to young Aiken and with a similar technique -- first the imperative, then the explanation or elaboration drawn from wide personal experience. Moreover, Burns took seriously the responsibility of fatherhood and valued the family as a socially cohesive force. It is inconceivable that he would have written to a younger man offering advice and outlining possibilities which he might well not have been ready to handle. Although one senses Burns's experience is used throughout as a guide, he does not figure largely in the poem as a presence. The epistle is addressed directly at Aiken and is intended to be read seriously. There are flashes of typical humour but, like most of the Mauchline epistles of 1786, the poem is a slighter effort because Burns's aim at the outset is less grandiose. If he pleases Aiken and his father without being untrue to himself, then that is sufficient.

Burns offers information and advice on serious matters of conduct. These are not "tips" about the foppish etiquette of dress; instead, Aiken has turned to Burns for someone to provide his son with a set of ground-rules for self-preservation. As befits such important questions, the language of this more formal epistle is restrained. It is largely in English but "tipped", where fitting, with Scots. This

linguistic mix is exactly suited to the concerned but tolerant attitude which Burns adopts:

But when on Life we're tempest-driven,  
                   A Conscience but a canker --  
 A correspondence fix'd wi' Heav'n,  
                   Is sure a noble anchor! (ll. 77-80)

His concern for Aiken's conduct and welfare is conveyed by language which can, and does, smoothly modulate from the familiar to the lofty without undue strain. For example, in the opening stanzas, familiarity is achieved by the form of address, "Andrew dear", by the natural shifts of emphasis from the concessive opening of line 3 to the head-shaking admissions of line 22, and by colloquialisms like "aff han'". These familiar lines effectively stall accusations of pomposity without destroying the serious spirit in which the advice is offered. As advice, Burns's warnings and suggestions are hardly original, and it is his skill in phrasing them without stiffness which is most notable. For example, stanzas nine and ten, though both in Standard English on important questions of morality and personal conduct, are distinctively different:

The great CREATOR to revere,  
 Must sure become the Creature;  
 But still the preaching cant forbear,  
 And ev'n the rigid feature:  
 Yet ne'er with Wits prophane to range,  
 Be complaisance extended;  
 An atheist-laugh's a poor exchange  
 For Deity offended. (ll. 65-72)

In the above, the "correct" attitude is defined in the first two lines, to be followed by a cautionary piece of advice, warning against a perverted form of the attitude advocated. After this comes another cautionary two lines, showing the opposite extreme to "preaching cant" and "the rigid feature", and this warning is crystallized in the gnomic maxim of the final two lines. Stanza ten, however, proceeds in a diff-



erent fashion. It opens, not with the definition of an attitude, but with a description of a possibility, behind which lies considerable experience, one feels:

When ranting round in Pleasure's ring,  
Religion may be blinded; (11. 73,74)

If this does not happen, another possibility is equally serious:

Or if she gie a random-fling,  
It may be little minded; (11. 75,76)

Here, again, no advice is given; there is merely the outlining of a possibility. The final four lines, as in the previous stanza, state a fact, a memorable piece of wisdom to be treasured, but the tone of the whole is less peremptory than stanza nine and more balanced in construction. The first four lines outline possible situations; the second four offer a comforting solution to life's problems.

These sentiments, which express Burns's respect for religion, are far from hypocritical. Such passages might be paralleled from other verse-epistles such as that to M'Math or from many of Burns's prose letters.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, although the opening of stanza seven may seem to suggest total surrender to worldliness, the second half of the stanza reveals that it is the most appropriate way for his correspondent to retain that which Burns treasured more than wealth, "... the glorious privilege/ Of being independant".

The "Epistle to a Young Friend" is unusual in respect of its ideas and expression. This is partly to be explained by the nature of Burns's audience, partly by the tradition in which he was writing, and partly by the wish to salvage something of value from the dismal circumstances of his life as it seemed in May of 1786. However, another ex-

<sup>7</sup> Respect for religion is behind Burns's impulse to spring to the defence of Dr. McGill, and is stated with fervour in epistles to Clarinda, to Robert Muir, and Mrs. Dunlop. See F., I, 135-36; 153-54; 159; 207-08; and 282-83.

planation is to be found in Burns's protean character. This epistle is as much the fruit of experience as the "ram-stam" epistle to Smith. Especially at this point in his life, Burns's emotional condition varied violently, as his prose letters to David Brice and James Smith reveal.<sup>8</sup> In the Kilmarnock edition, this epistle is preceded by "To Ruin" (K12), and it is possible that its fitness as an answer to that gloomy poem may have been a factor in Burns's mind as he compiled his first edition. It is followed by "On a Scotch Bard Gone to the West Indies" (K100) which might be read as Burns's development of the two final lines of the "Epistle to a Young Friend". Although it is improbable that the poems were deliberately grouped thus, this juxtaposition ought to alert the reader to the quixotic nature of Burns's character. It is unwise to allege hypocrisy or aberration in a poet who, within pages, can write poems conveying despair, dispensing sober advice, and putting a brave face on misfortune.

If proof were required of the violent fluctuations in Burns's moods a comparison of the "Epistle to a Young Friend" and Burns's answer to the epistle from Thomas Walker of Pool, near Ochiltree, would provide it. At most, a few months separate these poems but they are altogether different in style, in tone, and in vivacity of expression. The former was composed in May 1786 when Burns was beset by problems. It was written against a background of rejection, possible emigration, and frustrated hopes by a disappointed and embittered man. The epistle to the poetical tailor (K119 B) is a refreshing contrast. For this familiar epistle, Burns returns triumphantly to "Standart Habby" and writes with the abandon and provocative joy of a liberated prisoner.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 30-31, and 35-36.

The effect is as if a caged animal had been returned to its native environment. Burns cavorts and dashes with a sense of exhilaration, proudly flexing muscles which had almost atrophied. He revels in his restored freedom. The animal high spirits and snorting anger which are apparent throughout the poem are to be explained by Burns's radically changed circumstances. Although a definite date of composition cannot be established, the poem, as Kinsley notes, certainly belongs to "the second part of 1786."<sup>9</sup> It is unwise to attempt greater precision because, as was noted of the epistle to Rankine and as is obvious from his distortion of the charges in the tailor's epistle, Burns always preserved the right to select details and invent situations for artistic ends. However, it is clear that the heady high-jinks and outrageous suggestion of this epistle are signs of gloom dispelled. They point not only to Burns's relief at receiving from Rev. Auld his certificate as a bachelor, but the tone seems to imply immunity from further punishment. As a result, the epistle should probably be dated in late August or September by which time the Kilmarnock edition had proved an overwhelming success, Burns had almost entirely given up the idea of emigration, and had successfully evaded James Armour's detaining warrant. Moreover, the vaunting sexuality of Burns's narrative in this epistle corresponds in spirit and possibly also in tune with the bawdy masculinity of the prose letter to Richmond.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Kinsley, *op. cit.*, III, 1199.

<sup>10</sup>See F., I, 41. Burns's more complete version of this traditional song is given in K124.

The poem is one of Burns's happiest productions. The narrative section, which is both justification and challenge, is more fanciful and inventive than that of the epistle to Rankine. Burns's handling of "Standart Habby" for reproducing the subtleties of voice is masterly, modulating fluently from naive innocence to sly insinuation. For all its skill and humour, however, it remains a lesser epistle than those of 1784 and 1785. Then, the pressure of circumstances in Mauchline required that Burns be instructive, visionary, daring, as well as abusive. Now, all that he attempts is his defence against a specific charge. He is determined to show that he has been in the right, but at no point does one feel that his sly, satirical justification is addressed to a wider audience than Thomas Walker, the tailor, and William Simson, the friend whose provocative cuts in the tailor's second epistle Burns quickly recognized. As befits the local celebrity, Burns is concerned with his own image, and little else.

The epistle plunges "in medias res" as Burns roars out his irritation at the meddling criticism of the tailor:

What ails ye now, ye lousie b--h,  
 To thresh my back at sic a pitch?  
 Losh man! hae mercy wi' your natch,  
                                   Your bodkin's bauld,  
 I did na suffer ha'f sae much  
                                   Frae Daddie Auld.

(ll. 1-6)

This is the voice of a man who considers himself unjustly castigated for a minor offence. The fact that Burns replies with such gusto is certain proof that he knew who was behind the tailor's epistle (K119 A). One can almost see the glint in his eye as he rises to Simson's challenge. Not only will he shock the tailor but he will entertain Simson by his provocative narrative and, in addition, celebrate his delivery from his enemies in this high-spirited epistle. The comparison of the tailor's

attack with Auld's thunderings is hardly justified by a glance at that epistle which is tame where it is not clumsy. Burns has exaggerated the tailor's criticisms because he wishes to suggest, in stanza two, that he is overreacting wildly. As in all Burns's epistles, the impression of spontaneity, suggested here by the rapid and natural transition from stanza one to two, has been carefully engineered. Throughout, Burns exercises the artistic privilege of distortion and selection, choosing those criticisms which allow him to justify his actions, rebut certain charges and dramatize his situation. Forced to do public penance for fornication by the will of an authority he had mocked and before those very "rigidly righteous" who had also figured in his satires, Burns was smarting with personal affront and looking for revenge. The tailor's epistle provided exactly the opportunity he wanted. He peppers his opponent from all angles and with all sorts of blows. Burns's exhibitionist urge is fully satisfied here as he humiliates his correspondent with a demonstration of virtuoso skill and ridicules his Mauchline enemies by the image of himself which he projects -- Burns the talented performer; rakish, rebellious, intolerant of criticism, and defiantly bawdy.

Stanza two is designed for maximum affront and insult. The unrepentant poet deliberately flaunts the carnal pleasure of "gettin' weans", as the tailor had decorously phrased it, by concentrating on the physical aspects of the business:

What tho' at times when I grow crouse,  
I gi'e their wames a random pouce, (ll. 7,8)

This note of challenge is continued as Burns denies that his misdeameanour merits the tailor's old-maidish warnings and criticisms. In the final two lines of the stanza, Burns thumps him on the nose with

arrogant ease and pokes fun at his trade in accents of the broadest vernacular:

Gae mind your seam, ye prick the louse,  
An' jag the flae. . . . (ll. 11,12)

A further shock is in store for this over-zealous critic as Burns calls King David in his defence. He savours the tailor's horror at this willful misappropriation of a good name.

King David o' poetic brief,  
Wrought 'mang the lasses sic mischief  
As filled his after life wi' grief  
An' bloody rants,  
An' yet he's ranked amang the chief  
O' lang syne saunts. (ll. 13-18)

This willingness to show how he can use the Bible to his own ends, as the tailor had used the threat of Hell to buttress his warnings to Burns regarding his "wenching", is characteristic of the deliberate irreverence which pervades the epistle. The climax of Burns's counter-attack is reserved until the two final lines of the stanza. There, he implies that his correspondent should compare the fate which he had envisaged for him in lines 27, 28 and 35, 36 of his epistle with David's exalted position in the eyes of the Kirk. These lines provide a neat introduction to the outrageous suggestion in the following stanza, and also reveal the paradoxical attitude of the Kirk which can conveniently neglect David's "faults" yet relentlessly pursues Burns.

Having highlighted this paradox, Burns now outrages the tailor further by suggesting that, like the Biblical hero, he too may " ... gie auld cloven Clooty's haunts/ An unco slip yet" (ll. 21,22). The unwelcome familiarity of line 19 is an effective stroke. One can imagine the tailor recoiling in horror -- (as if Mary Whitehouse was reacting to an embrace from a pornographic film-maker) -- as Burns, this reprobate,

speaks to him with all the levelling intimacy of an equal. The outrageousness of his suggestion is increased by the way in which Burns parades the details of "... wicked rhymes, an' drucken rants", and by the cavalier attitude he adopts to the terrors of Hell. In contrast to the tailor's grim visualization of the scene, "auld cloven Clooty's haunts" suggests a faintly disreputable nightclub. Moreover, the possibility of his salvation is particularly affronting simply because Burns has described the happy scene in such a homely way. He imagines he will "... snugly sit amang the saunts/ At Davie's hip yet" (ll. 23,24). He calmly accommodates himself among "the saunts", as if into the spot next to David reserved specifically for him.

However, at this high point of effrontery, Burns appears to concede that his vision is, after all, a pipe-dream. He confronts harsh reality as he recalls the sour comments of the Session on his escapades. Of course, this ruefulness is a trick. Burns manipulates the reader's response as a crafty boxer feigns pain to gain a psychological advantage when he throws aside pretence and fights with gusto. The sudden, apparently fresh rush of energy drains his opponent. "But fegs," says Burns, annoyed with the Session for dispelling his pleasant vision of salvation, "... the Session says I maun/ Gae fa' upo' anither plan". No more, according to the Session, is he to continue his care-free, rakish career of "... garren lasses cawp the cran / Clean heels owre body". The elaboration of the metaphorical phrase, "cawp the cran", by the exaggerated detail of line 28 is intended to suggest the overwhelming force of Burns's addresses to females as his charm bowls them over and into a vulnerable position. But this pleasant prospect

is followed by the very different vision which the Session enjoins on him; he must, instead, " ... sairly thde their mither's ban, / Afore the howdy."

But, Burns turns this warning to his own account. Instead of heeding the Session's statement, he uses it as a starting-point for his exhibitionist, set-piece of a narrative. From line 31 onwards, the epistle is addressed less and less to the tailor and Simson. Burns uses the poem to offer his interpretation of his tussle with the Kirk Session. He reconstructs the scene as he does, partly for its entertainment value, but *more*so because he took an arch delight in imagining his enemies thus frustrated and also because he needed to believe that their authority could no longer touch him. In the summons of the beadle, the verbs "answer" and "blam'd" create the atmosphere of a trial. Burns will cast himself in the role of the Artful Dodger, irrepressible and cheeky before Authority, and will suggest that the charge is ludicrous and the prosecuting counsel mad to pursue it.

In straightforward narrative (or so it seems), Burns tells of his proud behaviour before his accusers. The phrase, "a Sunday's face" (1.37) implies that he is being tried by standards which are artificial; they are required on Sundays only and are conveniently forgotten for the remaining six days of the week. His "confession" is "open" and "fair" for he sees no reason to conceal his action. It was perfectly natural and, therefore, free from blame. (The attitude is that of the epistle to Rankine where Burns also used the imagery of the trial to suggest his unjust persecution.) This, however, is not the verdict of "Mess John" who delivers his judgement in lines 43-48. In this stanza, the aptness of "Standart Habby" for rendering familiar speech is immediately obvious. The first two lines tell, in reported speech, the burden of Auld's condemnation:



A furnicator lown he call'd me,  
An' said my fau't frae bliss expelled me; (ll. 43,44)

After a pause in which the echo of this broadside dies away, Burns gives his head-shaking reaction to the charge -- "I own'd the tale was true he tell'd me". The rhyme-scheme ties this line to the two previous. Burns concedes a point to the Session, and appears to be acquiescing in their verdict when, suddenly, an insolent volte-face is managed in the short line 46. Its rhyme dissociates it from lines 43-45 but the rules governing the internal movement of the stanza link it inevitably with the previous line. However, the sense of "'But what the matter'" is contrary to what the rhythm of the stanza has led us to expect. The ease with which Burns can say this while, at the same time, admitting the truth of the accusations, is superbly expressive of his lack of concern. In the remaining two lines, he provides the explanation for his paradoxical acceptance:

Quo' I, 'I fear unless ye geld me,  
'I'll ne'er be better.' (ll. 47,48)

Burns's defence is that he is being condemned simply for acting in a perfectly natural manner. Unless they "geld" him, and so remove his natural desire for the opposite sex, he will "ne'er be better". Yet this natural urge, under strict Calvinist doctrine, expels him "frae bliss". This alone is, for Burns, a telling condemnation of a doctrine which can demand such unnatural behaviour from man and woman. His method of conveying his opposition to the Session and of excusing his actions is to suggest, humorously, that it would require some drastic measure such as gelding -- that is, reducing him from independent being to tractable beast -- before he could act as they wish.

The satire and humour of lines 49-54 is that the zealous "Mess John" actually takes this suggestion seriously. This, in itself, is a

damning criticism. The man who is so blind to fun and laughter as to react thus is both dull and dangerous, and an example of the malign effect of deterministic, narrow Calvinism. "Mess John" seizes on Burns's idea and elaborates it with increasing fervour in a stanza which becomes a sermon in miniature. "Geld you!", exclaims Burns's tormentor, as the justness of this suggestion catches his imagination, "... and whatfore no." With this one line, Burns conveys volumes. One can sense the minister's initial flash of recognition on his hearing Burns's idea; one is aware of the briefest of moments in which he gives it his serious consideration; and finally, one watches appalled and amused as he depicts, with the appropriate theological apparatus, the working out of this notion to which he has given his total assent. Lines 50 to 54 are a gloriously comic variation on the age-old conflict between the spiritual and carnal aspects of Man's personality. The correct, Party-line, attitude of the card-carrying Calvinist is described in language, the plain matter-of-factness of which resembles the instructions on a medical prescription or in a training-manual:

'If that your right hand, leg or toe,  
 'Should ever prove your sp'ritual foe,  
                           'You shou'd remember  
 'To cut it aff, an' whatfore no,  
                           'Your dearest member.' (ll. 50-54)

"You shou'd remember" is masterly -- as if one could forget such an instruction. With the fanatic's devastating logic, "Mess John" views Burns's suggestion as a sensible, albeit novel, extension of conventional dogma.

The metaphorical language of the Kirk is used to carry its burden of satire. The pun on "member" gains its force from innumerable sermons which preached lopping off "diseased members" to purify and preserve the trunk. Such satire makes Burns's point. Man is a complex

being, a compound of "eros" and "agape"; the Auld Licht dogma is too harsh and too narrow to provide a viable basis for judgements of the sort levelled against him.

Burns replies to the minister's demonstration of the correct course of action in canny language which reads as if it had been honed to this perfection by generations of speakers:

'Na, na', quo' I, 'I'm no for that,  
'Gelding's nae better than 'tis ca't (11. 54,55)

He suggests, and is willing to accept, a less permanently damaging form of punishment, resigning himself to the fact that his accusers will never be persuaded of their myopic attitude:

'I'd rather suffer for my faut,  
'A hearty flewit,  
'As sair owre hip as ye can draw't!  
'Tho' I should rue it. (11. 57-60)

He makes one final attempt, however, which he knows is guaranteed to provoke rather than placate -- that, of course, is his reason for suggesting it. He offers his solution with a casual confidence which implies that there is a very simple remedy for cases such as his:

'Or gin ye like to end the bother,  
'To please us a', I've just ae ither, (11. 61,62)

With expectations thus skilfully raised, Burns lets loose his witty Parthian shot, and is off, to avoid the consequences:

'When next wi' yon lass I forgather,  
'Whate'er betide it,  
'I'll frankly gi'e her 't a' thegither,  
'An' let her guide it. (11. 63-66)

The future tense in line 63 suggests that, in spite of the Session's "hearty flewit", there is something irrepressible in Burns's spirit which will inevitably lead him to "forgather" with his "lass". The word "next" denies their authority outright. All their warnings and punishments, like those of the tailor, are to no avail, but Burns adds

insult to injury by the provoking and deliberately crude "doubles entendres" of these lines. The sexual connotations of "gi'e her 't" and "let her guide it" need not be elaborated. With this, Burns takes a swipe at the Orthodox's narrow conception of sin and culpability. If both man and woman are aware of the consequences, are both willing, and both enjoy fornication -- (the latter being a suggestion guaranteed to bring down the wrath of the Session on the hapless soul who so much as thought it) --, then, according to Burns, there can be no question of right and wrong, blame and innocence. On this triumphant note, Burns leaves the stage.

The narrative has revealed Burns as the victor in his encounter with the Session and has ridiculed the primness of the tailor who makes a brief re-appearance in the final stanza. There, Burns portrays himself as the persecuted innocent, uncertain as to why his innocuous suggestion should have so angered the Session:

I said 'Gude night', and cam' awa',  
   And left the Session;  
 I saw they were resolved a'  
   On my oppression. (11. 69-72)

He implicitly compares his situation with that of the persecuted Gavin Hamilton. Though one may prefer the undoubted humour of this narrative to the angry denunciation of the epistle to M'Math where Hamilton's fate was described, this change of tone reveals a drop in the seriousness of Burns's writing. It is not simply that he is attacking in a different fashion and choosing to laugh rather than castigate. It is, rather, that Burns's estimation of the potential effectiveness of the epistle as a means of ensuring change in society has decreased.

Like the versified invitation to Dr. John Mackenzie (K114) which preceded the epistle to Thomas Walker, Burns's poem on the

Rev. J. Steven, "The Calf" (K125), was intended as a bagatelle and as such was sent to his Kilmarnock friend Robert Muir and probably also to Dr. Mackenzie. Its only interest is for purposes of comparison. Though Burns's great familiar epistles certainly give the impression of spontaneity, it is obvious, when they are compared with this truly extempore production, that he exercised the skill of an artist and a craftsman to achieve that impression. The poem on Steven is mildly amusing, but all that it owes to any epistolary tradition is the fact that it was sent to someone. It is not a familiar epistle, merely familiar verse. Inconsequential and forcedly witty, it resembles some of the parochial rubbish exchanged by Scots poets of the early and mid-century, like Nicol and Pennecuik, as noted in Chapter One. It is another example of the way in which the inspiration for his epistles no longer comes from Burns. As in "The Inventory" or the brief note to Gavin Hamilton (K102), external circumstances suggest the subject of the poem. Here, it is an unhappy choice of words by a minister. In "The Inventory", it had been the challenge of versifying a tax-return. Burns's urge for self-expression and self-dramatization, for conveying to others his ideas and emotions, has disappeared. Now, as was to be even more true of Edinburgh, he was content to entertain.

The final epistle which Burns wrote in Mauchline is a curious combination of exhibitionist flourish and conviction. William Logan, to whom the epistle (K129) was addressed, was a convivial, retired, military man with an excruciating taste in puns, a talent for music, and a comfortable house in Ayr where he lived with his sister, Susan. His service in the American War of Independence (where he would have known the rough and tumble of camp-life) and his familiar hospitality may account for the lack of reserve in this epistle, although, in Logan, Burns was writing to a man who was clearly his social superior. There

is, perhaps, one other reason for Burns's backslapping familiarity. Logan was a talented fiddler, and in addressing this epistle to him Burns was speaking as one imaginative artist to another. This basic fact took precedence over social barriers because, as Burns's contrast of their position with that of "The harpy, hoodock, purse-proud RACE" (l. 38) makes plain, they shared insights and pleasures which none but those who create could know. Theirs was a Freemasonry of the imagination.

To express this conviction in a way that was appropriate to his correspondent, Burns has written a series of variations on the theme of imaginative creativity. He generates powerful images expressive of the freedom and sense of cathartic release which all artists can enjoy. Stanzas such as two and five have the polish and varied pace of sarabandes and gigue in a musical suite:

When idly goavin whyles we saunter,  
 Yirr, Fancy barks, -- awa we canter,  
 Up-hill, down-brae, till some mishanter,  
                   Some black Bog-hole,  
 Arreest us; then the scathe an' banter  
                   We're forc'd to thole. (ll. 7-12)

Each highlights some aspect of the creative temperament which they share. Thematically, the poem is very similar to Burns's first epistle to Lapraik. It is written by one artist to another on the subject of the power of art to sustain and enrich life, and the image of the poet presented is that of a carefree, liberated, amorous spirit. In addition, certain stanzas reveal that Burns has preserved the same intuitive feel for the spoken voice and the ability to use the opportunities offered by "Standart Habby" to convey it:

We've fauts an' failins, -- granted clearly:  
 We're frail, backsliding Mortals meerly:  
 Eve's bonie SQUAD, Priests wyte them sheerly,  
                   For our grand fa':  
 But still -- but still -- I like them dearly;  
                   GOD bless them a'! (ll. 49-54)

Like an advocate, Burns admits the reasonable case against Woman for her part in Man's fall from grace -- "We've fauts an' failins, -- granted clearly". Burns offers the first half of the line, expecting no rash challenge to this fact. Hearing none, he affirms it as a universal truth in the second half. Argument number two has the same air of humility; once again he offers his statement as self-evident -- "We're frail, backsliding Mortals meerly:" The clinching accusation comes in the next two lines, but the normal syntax is modified to throw the accused, "Eve's bonie SQUAD," into prominence at the beginning of the line. Burns holds them up, inviting us to look at them closely, and then launches his final, crushing blow -- "Eve's bonie SQUAD, Priests wyte them sheerly/ For our grand fa'." This accusation is given great force by the pause after "fa'" -- the silence is awesome -- and by the use of words such as "sheerly" and "grand" which stress the magnitude of the charge against them. But, in the face of this overwhelming evidence, and despite such carefully marshalled arguments, Burns sheds his advocate's gown and, half-sheepishly and half-defiantly, proclaims the irresistible appeal of "the JADS" with "But still -- but still -- I like them dearly". The effect of the repetition is obvious; the lingering affection which it signifies becomes an excited devotion in the final phrase, "GOD bless them a'!"

However, despite these obvious triumphs and despite the humour which bubbles throughout the epistle (and which conveys Burns's sense of release and anticipation at the prospect of his journey to Edinburgh), the poem cannot be favourably compared with that to Lapraik. It is difficult to state precisely the reasons for this judgement, but one factor is certainly Burns's recent overwhelming and public success as a poet. As Burns the poet, a public figure of some notoriety, he was no longer the same man as he had been in his epistles of 1784 and 1785.

Certain attitudes, certain roles were now closed to him. The tendency is for his public to see him as an entertainer, a successful phenomenon, and despite the evidence to the contrary in certain stanzas, the Burns who appears in this epistle is the poet as entertainer.<sup>11</sup> Though the parallel cannot be exact, nor are the differences between the epistles so great as this comparison would suggest, but Burns's writing in the epistle to Logan when contrasted with that of the epistle to Lapraik is like the difference between "Mack the Knife" when sung by a "crooner" and the song as conceived by Brecht and Weill and sung in a German cabaret of the thirties. The words and the notes are very familiar, but the delivery is different, the audience is different, and the intended effect is, therefore, different.

To some extent, this is obvious from the strained manner in which Burns delivers his ideas. Stanzas like four, five and seven are examples of Mr. Spectator's "false wit". In his desire to slant the epistle to Logan's taste, and in his wish to justify an image of the poet as a man able to turn a compliment with ease and nimble skill, Burns uses music imagery with too much cleverness. Similarly, the alliterative exaggeration of lines 57-60 is disappointing:

The witching, curst, delicious blinkers  
   Hae put me hyte;  
 An' gart me weet my waukrife winkers,  
   Wi' girnan spite.           (11. 57-60)

<sup>11</sup>Burns himself was conscious of the changes which success imposed upon him. This is obvious from letters such as those to William Niven (F., I, 39) in which he voices his resentment at his verse becoming public property. In a letter to Ballantine, he fears that his "honest sincerity" will be misinterpreted as "the anxiously served-up address of the Poet wishing to conciliate a liberal Patron" (F., I, 45). At a deeper and less conscious level, it is significant that in those letters which follow the successful publication of his first edition, Burns introduces himself as "the Poet" (F., I, 45), offers "a Poet's honest wishes" (F., I, 48), tells "how the heart of the poor Bard dances with rapture" (F., I, 49), and knowingly informs a correspondent that "Poets are such outre beings" (F., I, 50). Burns is now classing himself as a Poet, and speaking as an expert. Poetry is no longer a tool. It is his profession.



With this, Burns loses his poetic dignity and is reduced to the same debased level of mimicry as those "minstrel bands" which flourished in the early years of this century. He acts as he is expected to act, according to a stereotyped image. Even here, before Edinburgh, one can appreciate why he was to find conditions in the capital so unfavourable for the composition of familiar epistolary verse.

Nevertheless, there are elements in the poem which suggest that Burns's talent was maturing, and that he could still use the familiar epistle for the development of far from simple ideas. The complexity of his contrasting symbols in lines 31-36, for example, suggests a Blakean richness of association. "CLEGS O' FEELING" conveys the irritability which accompanies inspiration, its infrequency, its darting bursts, and its fragility. Likewise, "square and rule" suggests the mechanical spirit and the mechanical approach to art of those who "... think to climb Parnassus/ By dint o' Greek!" In addition, it is a small sign of his growing confidence that he can parody the excessive politenesses of formal letters in his deliberate mispronunciation of "Faites mes BAISEMAINS respectueuse,/ To sentimental Sister Susie" (11.73,74).

The poem which closes Burns's epistolary writing in Mauchline is representative of those examined in this chapter. His technical skills are as sharp and fresh as before, but he no longer has the same urge or the same opportunities to use them in developing ideas and conveying them with urgency and finality. The determining factors of his epistles are increasingly external and though Burns is often successful in the new types of epistolary poetry which he attempts, that verse, with the possible exception of "Extempore -- to Mr. Gavin Hamilton" expresses a less original vision. As his circumstances changed, his epistolary poetry had also to change, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the verse-epistles produced in Edinburgh.

## Chapter Four

The epistolary verse which Burns wrote during his Edinburgh period (by which I understand those months from November 1786 to March 1788 during which his life revolved around the social and cultural activity of the capital) is utterly different from the verse-epistles which he composed in Mauchline, either during the period of his most intense creativity in 1784 and 1785 or in the less successful period of 1786. He writes fewer epistles (and, indeed, less poetry) during these months than at any other time. For the most part, he eschews the vernacular and native verse-forms in favour of eighteenth-century English diction and metres. Most importantly, the epistolary verse of this period is the least successful and least original that Burns wrote. Why should this be so? It will be the purpose of this chapter to suggest briefly some of the answers, and to examine these epistles in an attempt to show that the above summary is just and accurate.

One answer, the answer perhaps, is readily stated, but its many consequences are less easy to trace. Burns's epistolary verse changes because, on his quitting Mauchline for Edinburgh, the circumstances of Burns's life changed suddenly and drastically. Pope's great epistolary poetry, like Burns's, was written out of a definite stable context. For the English poet, Twickenham, his grotto, his Classicism, his Catholicism, his elitism, his friendships with politicians and thinkers who had been passed over and were unjustly out of favour -- these provided the physical and spiritual contours of a world from which Pope could construct a body of thought and give it form in a traditional style of poetry. Though the contours of Burns's world differ at almost every point from that of Pope, both poets share their total immersion in a well-defined environment from which solid base they could formulate

and convey a philosophy, and a representative life-style. Of all the "kinds" of poetry, the familiar verse-letter more than any other form insists on a relationship between poet and audience. Firstly, and most obviously, there must be an audience, of one at least; if not, the epistle becomes a monologue. Secondly, the poet needs to know something, either by personal experience or reputation, of his audience's temper and beliefs; if not, he cannot judge the tone to be adopted, or must necessarily write a formal address. Thirdly, and most importantly, there ought to be some point of contact between poet and audience -- experiences shared, lives lived, or some area of common concern. In Pope's Twickenham and Burns's Mauchline, these conditions were satisfied.

In Ayrshire, Burns's correspondents were young men like Sillar and Smith, the one a fellow-member of the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, the other an unthinking partner in Burns's riots, and both capable of understanding the revolutionary and subversive qualities of his epistolary verse. Lapraik and Rankine were farmers like Burns, and so had shared hardships on the land. They could appreciate his coarse bawdry and the bias of countryman against "cit" which pervades the epistles. For them, too, the aristocracy were the jaded, heartless men and women of "The Twa Dogs ...". They would appreciate Burns's antipathy to the commercial spirit, to the artificiality of University education, and his pride in honest toil. They could willingly share in the utopias which Burns envisages because they were rustic, innocent -- Ayrshire versions of the Sabine farm. Men like Goldie and M'Math were capable of responding to the theological satire in Burns's epistles. The bitterness with which factional religious interests were pursued was ideal for the purposes of epistolary verse. Such a rigid division of society and morality into the blessed and the damned gave Burns ample scope for satire, irony, and

the expression of group-solidarity. At times this could lead to the ghetto-mentality: that is, the belief that factors peculiar to the community in which one lives are necessarily commendable merely because they are the marks which distinguish it from the world around it -- a not-with-us-therefore-against-us temperament. On the other hand, such conditions could produce an invigorating confidence and the certainty that one's allusions, hints, parodies, and mimicry would be understood readily and with appreciation.

Life in Mauchline for Burns was such that his epistles were acts of great importance for him and for others. They were invested with a symbolic quality. In this close, stifling world where theocratic domination had insidiously controlled and channelled society, Burns's position was at once that of agent provocateur and embattled champion. He was a rallying-point for the forces of disaffection and liberalism. Actions which elsewhere would have been insignificant became important. The way he wore his hair, his dress, his obtrusive disputations, his "dissipation and rot" -- all were noted by one side as examples of his ungodliness and by another faction as victories against Big Brother. His epistles had a definite role. They could call to arms or raise morale; they could be an effective weapon, or the occasion for a joyful release of tension for himself and for others; they could be seen as a system of alliances, or acts of sabotage; his Little Red Book, or his monument to the noble traditions of his native region. Whatever role Burns envisaged for each, all were essential, to himself and, as he intended, to his correspondents.

He wrote for men who appreciated the daring of his ideas, the skill of his expression, and the unconditional quality of his friendship. He wrote from within a clearly-defined social context where he had a niche - that of farmer and subversive poet. He was alive to

Mauchline's subtleties, its secrets, its scandals, and its prominent personalities. At the same time, however, as a member of a small subgroup allied loosely by an ill-defined set of ideas, he was sufficiently apart from Mauchline society to register its failings and expose them. This champion of a rebel band and defender of Kyle's reputation regarded his epistolary verse as a political act. When he began to write his series of epistles in Mauchline, he was independent and care-free. He owed nothing and had nothing to lose. This truth, coupled with the divided nature of village society and the fact that his audience shared his values (if not his insight), encouraged speculative adventurousness, and confidence in creating alternative systems with which to counter the prevailing Orthodoxy. In the Mauchline epistles of 1784 and 1785, there is a lack of constraint and firmness of conviction which is reminiscent of Blake's intensely personal vision.

However, Burns's situation in Mauchline gradually changed, with consequences for his verse-epistles in particular. Epistolary poetry is essentially the poetry of a minority: it is the poetry of challenge or self-justification. It can question the dominant assumptions and beliefs of a class or society, or can defend the standards and values of a small group, or of one man. As a result of events in Mauchline in the Spring and Summer of 1786, Burns's position became too prominent and precarious for him to risk the challenge of epistolary verse and his disappointment and disillusionment too great for him to attempt self-justification. The resulting changes in the epistolary poetry of 1786 were noted in Chapter Three, and this process was accelerated with the move to Edinburgh in November of that year.

Burns set out for Edinburgh with one clear aim -- to publish a second volume of poetry. He was encouraged in this by the unexpected success of his first edition and by the advice of local professional men such as Ballantine, Aiken, and Mackenzie. A further

spur was the support of certain of the Ayrshire gentry like Dalrymple of Orangefield who provided him with a passport to the upper reaches of Edinburgh society in his introduction to the Earl of Glencairn. An even more welcome surprise was the favourable reception of his verse by such an arbiter of literary and cultural taste in the capital as Dugald Stewart, to whom Burns had been introduced by the ever-thoughtful Mackenzie at Catrine. Such "backing" put pressures on Burns which he had never before experienced, and constrained him, and his opportunity for expression, in a way that had never been true of Mauchline. He was uncomfortably aware that he must not betray this heavy investment of local trust by irresponsible behaviour in his life as well as his poetry, nor must he show their judgement of his worth to have been faulty. Moreover, his elevation to the status of a local personality brought with it pressure to act in a way that would not disgrace his class or region whose traditions he felt himself to be upholding and in whose way of life he felt considerable pride.

This explains, in large measure, the many prose letters which Burns wrote to Ayrshire from the capital. In letters to Hamilton, to Ballantine, to Muir, to the Rev. G. Lawrie among others, Burns sends back progress reports from his field-station to his "backers" in Ayrshire.<sup>1</sup> Their trust in him is justified. Their gamble has been successful. Burns is well and the sensation of the winter season. Epistles such as these, however, have an added significance. It is noticeable that the humour, insight, and variation in emotional drive which in Mauchline was channelled into the verse-epistles is now to be found in Burns's prose letters. That to Ballantine is a good example of this tendency, and it also reveals why Burns's opportunities to write epistolary poetry in the capital were diminished. He can no

<sup>1</sup>See F., I, 55, 56; 56, 57; 57, 58; 70, 71.

longer assume a body of shared knowledge in this Ayrshire friend. He is compelled to annotate and explain: he tells him just who Mr. Peter Miller is and where the Grand Lodge of Scotland meets. Edinburgh was a very different world, and Burns never felt himself to be a permanent part of it.<sup>2</sup> He had known nothing like it, nor did his close friends and acquaintances, and although he was at the heart of Edinburgh society, he was not of that society as he had been of Mauchline. The change which Burns had to make was comparable to asking a resistance-fighter or revolutionary to transform himself into a diplomatic envoy and salesman.

In Mauchline, poetry had meant many things to Burns, but he had never considered it as a potential source of income. Even the decision to publish his Kilmarnock edition was merely a natural wish to leave behind some tangible symbol of his passing before he emigrated to Jamaica. In Edinburgh, by contrast, poetry was his only means of obtaining capital. It was a marketable commodity with, as the enthusiastic reception of his Kilmarnock edition had shown, high-earning potential. That Burns realized this (and that it affected his poetry) is obvious from the format and content of the Edinburgh edition of 1787. His acute sense of publicity had already led him to request permission to erect a headstone over Fergusson's neglected grave -- a calculated tribute to a fellow-spirit and a prick at the conscience of the city which had spurned him. This same sense alerted him to the value of exploiting the interest shown in his physical presence. He dressed in a way that highlighted his rural origins and, in an effort to maximize his physical advantages, affixed, as a frontispiece to the 1787

<sup>2</sup>The insubstantial nature of his success and the fickleness of his audience in Edinburgh are major preoccupations of Burns's letters from the capital. He regarded Edinburgh as an interlude. See F., I, 68, 69 and 69, 70 among many letters expressing these sentiments.

edition, the portrait of a handsome face which, with its frank, open countenance, would serve as a key to the man and his verse. Ultimately, he agreed to satisfy the desire of the beau monde who wished to be visibly associated with Scotland's latest fashionable phenomenon by printing, at some financial risk, the names of subscribers. The deletions from and additions to the edition (most of the latter being already written -- a fact which shows how inimical Burns felt the atmosphere in Edinburgh to be for sustained creative work) were made to reinforce his reputation for "uncommon penetration and sagacity", to appeal to the more liberal temper of a city which wanted to be titillated and gently shocked, and to emphasize the "obscurity of poverty and the obstructions of laborious life" through which his readers could see his "native genius bursting".<sup>3</sup> However, the poetry written soon after his arrival in Edinburgh does not augur well for his epistolary verse. The "Address to Edinburgh" (K135) reveals Burns's awkwardness when, as circumstances forced him increasingly to do, he had to write verse to show gratitude or compose according to standards of taste not of his own choosing. That poem smacks of cynicism in its fulsome praise of Wealth, Trade, Justice, and Learning, and in its servile surrender to alien standards of poetic fitness. The bankruptcy of poetic ideas revealed in the repetition of such similar nominal structures as "Scotia's darling seat" (l.1), "Legislation's sov'reign pow'rs" (l.4), "Architecture's noble pride" (l.11) suggest that Burns could be very ill at ease

<sup>3</sup>These quotations are from Mackenzie's review in the Lounger. A deliberate intention on Burns's part to justify Mackenzie's criticism is not open to proof, but one suspects that "Tam Samson's Elegy" (K117) and "Death and Doctor Hornbook ..." (K55) were included to testify to his insight into local character, and "A Fragment" (K38) as evidence of his perception of the wider world. "The Calf" (K125) and the "Address to the Unco Guid ..." (K39) are liberal without being revolutionary, and "A Winter Night" (K130) is a graphic account of the hardships which a ploughman poet might have to suffer.



when confined to exclusively English traditions and conventions. Such blind spots occur most often when he is striving after rhetorical effect, and are to be found in both prose and verse. However, he was perfectly capable of writing good poetry in English when situated within a Scottish context or, on occasion, in English alone as in "Despondency, an Ode" (K94), although here the sheet anchor of a Scottish formal stanza may be an important contributing factor. Burns was well-read in both English and Scots and enjoyed exploiting the poetic possibilities of each within one poem. In Edinburgh, however, he met with an audience who not only insisted on his using English increasingly to the exclusion of Scots but who regarded the latter as verdigris on fine bronze -- quaint, redolent of antiquity, but something which could and ought to be removed if true genius were to be allowed to shine through.

In the capital, his poetry was no longer the political act which it had been in Mauchline. It had become his sole source of income and the justification for quitting his village and family to live in comparative ease and comfort in sophisticated Edinburgh. There, he no longer had the status of champion of a small group, fighting, as he had done in the close combat of Mauchline, battles which had long since been won in Edinburgh. His situation was comparable, in some respects, with that of a volunteer who arrives to find that the enemy has been engaged and that his trusty weapon is no longer required. Moreover, he was now a national figure and dependent on good relations with the literati and the dispensers of political patronage. He soon lost the opportunity of poetic independence which was crucial for his epistolary poetry in Mauchline. From all sides, but especially from the second and third group of "backers", the Scottish aristocracy and the "litterateurs" who insisted on regarding him as a feather in Scotia's and Edina's cap, Burns was under constant pressure. One example of this

is the eleventh Earl of Buchan's condescending advice:

These little doric pieces of yours in our provincial dialect are very beautiful, but you will soon be able to diversify your language, your Rhyme and your subject, and then you will have it in your power to show the extent of your genius and to attempt works of greater magnitude, variety and importance.<sup>4</sup>

They expected him to respond gratefully as they nudged him away from the vernacular to the English which they, as educated men-of-the-world so admired, and which, after receiving the weighty impress of Hume and Robertson, was the only legitimate route to fame for Scots in Britain and Europe. Just as the Foreign Office might once have suggested to a visiting tribal chieftain the propriety (not to mention the possible advantages) of foregoing native dress when in Britain to negotiate a trade-deal, and recommended instead wearing a suit, so, too, representations, some less impudently phrased than others, were constantly made to Burns to dress up his thoughts in a guise more appropriate to the new position conferred upon him -- that of Caledonia's Bard. Although some of the advice and offers of help were the result of a genuine desire on behalf of individuals like Glencairn to see Burns prosper, the effect was often unfortunate. Too much help, when one is unable to repay the debt, is embarrassing. Burns was in danger of becoming a kept man. He could not possibly reciprocate such patronage and introductions as were showered on him except by his poetry.<sup>5</sup> There was, therefore, additional pressure on him to conform to alien standards out of mere gratitude.

<sup>4</sup>See The Life and Works of Robert Burns, ed. Chambers, rev. Wallace (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1896), II, 46. Dr. Moore's opinion is even more forthright. See William Wallace, Robert Burns and Mrs. Dunlop ... (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), p.34.

<sup>5</sup>For Burns's appreciation of this fact, see F., I, 123; "[R]hyme is the coin with which a Poet pays his debts of honor or gratitude:"

However, in such advice one suspects there was less concern for Burns than concern for the status of Scotland and the capital -- even Patrick Miller's offer of a farm in Dumfries was to ensure that the ploughman-poet could continue to fulfil expectations in an appropriate environment. The proprietary tone of Mackenzie's review in the Lounger suggests that Burns was regarded as a heaven-sent opportunity; on him could be lavished all the patronage and praise which was due to a uniquely Scottish phenomenon. That would establish Edinburgh truly as the Athens of the North. He was welcomed with such enthusiasm and praised for his untaught achievements because he exemplified a current myth which was particularly dear to Scotland, especially after Macpherson's Ossianic verse. Here was living proof of the existence of natural genius and untutored virtue. The precise and detailed scrutiny of Josiah Walker's account of Burns's introduction to Edinburgh society reflects this interest. It reads like the case-notes of a scientist as he observes, with expectant curiosity, the introduction of one life-form into an alien environment.<sup>6</sup> How will he behave? What will he do? Will he disgrace himself, or adapt, or triumph by the exercise of natural talents?

If the aristocracy patronized him, the literati and the scholars were interested in his symbolic value. There was in the capital, as there had been throughout the second half of the century especially, a scholarly and antiquarian interest in the Scottish traditional inheritance in literature, but more so in law and religion which were symbols of Scotland's independent status. Therefore, as had been the case in Mauchline, Burns's verse was valued by many not for its actual achievement as verse, but as the work of a Scot (and an uneducated Scot at that) who could write verse in socially and culturally acceptable forms.

<sup>6</sup>See Chambers-Wallace, II, 74-76.

One other point of similarity between Mauchline and Edinburgh is that each was dominated by an elite. In Mauchline, the elite had been economic and theological. In Edinburgh, it was professional and cultural. The capital was a city ruled with conscious exclusiveness by lawyers and by academics. (To teach at Edinburgh University in the eighteenth century, in contrast to Oxford or Cambridge, was to belong to a professional class). The city had a small, highly-educated group whose cultural preferences set the norms to which aspirants strove to attain. Burns was acquainted with and feted by many of the members of this group, but he never felt centrally involved with them, as friends or enemies, in the way that he had belonged in Mauchline. Of course, it might be argued that this need not have affected his epistolary poetry since Pope at Twickenham, for example, was not a member of the contemporary London society which he satirized. There is, however, an important difference. Pope had the independence and the recognized authority with which to comment and criticize. He was secure in the knowledge that, although the values which he championed were those of a decaying elite and were threatened by the vulgarity of a tasteless nouveau-riche, they remained valid because of a pedigree which stretched beyond the Renaissance to the Classical world. Burns's tradition, too, had a noble history, but it was a tradition which Edinburgh had chosen to forget and classify as vulgar or, at best, as suited only to the expression of convivial banalities in low clubs like the Crochallan Fencibles.

Burns no longer occupied the same position vis-a-vis the society in which he found himself as he had in Mauchline. Epistolary poetry in Edinburgh could not have the same scope. His audience's taste was different as was their experience of a life-style which Burns, with his almost peasant bias, had always regarded with suspicion and hostility. He was no longer close to his Ayrshire friends and acquaint-

tances, and when he returned to Mauchline he was greeted either enviously or sycophantically. There were other aspects of his life in Edinburgh, however, which also militated against the composition of epistolary poetry. For example, he led a very unsettled existence. During his first winter, there was a bewildering round of social engagements, from conversational "salons" to Masonic dinners. The journeys throughout Scotland in 1787 with Ainslie and Nicol were certainly welcome as recreational and educational -- Burns seems to have regarded them as a poor man's Grand Tour -- but they gave him no time to acquire that intimate knowledge of men and society, so necessary for epistolary verse, either in the places he visited or in Edinburgh.<sup>7</sup> He had, moreover, a vastly increased correspondence, almost every letter of which was a potential minefield where one wrong step, one piece of praise not received with due humility, would have brought his world tumbling down. Later still, his affair with Clarinda preoccupied him, and for a time his ventures were in that one bottom trusted.

However, Burns remained an alert, critical observer of himself and others. The self-knowledge which makes the Mauchliné epistles so refreshing is still to be found in the prose letters of this period and in the early entries in Burns's Second Commonplace Book. Nevertheless, despite this shrewd observation, Burns was unable to co-ordinate it into a coherent world view; even if he had been able to do this, he

<sup>7</sup>The first "tour" was of the Borders with Robert Ainslie, and lasted from 5th May to 1st June, 1787. The second was a brief sortie into the Western Highlands in late June, during which Burns was injured in a drunken horse-race. This kept him away from the capital until the beginning of August. In late August, and until 16th September, Burns toured the Highlands with the irascible William Nicol, and for most of October he journeyed through Stirlingshire with Dr. Adair, a relative of Mrs. Dunlop. At other times during 1787 and 1788, Burns was involved in the arduous and lengthy business that was travel in eighteenth-century Scotland. In November, 1787, he visited Patrick Miller at Dalswinton, near Dumfries, and in February, 1788, he was in Ayrshire and later at Ellisland.

had no-one to whom he could communicate it in a traditional epistolary form. Burns moved in this Edinburgh society, participating but sensing himself apart. He was conscious of his lack of polish, though convinced of his intelligence. He was sensitive to slights, but over-compensated when shown mere ordinary friendship. The Second Commonplace Book and the letters from the capital are the notes on which Burns would have based his epistles.<sup>8</sup> They cannot compensate, however, for that rich, deep awareness of a society in which one has lived for many years and viewed with a critical but understanding eye. As a result, Burns's composition of epistles in this period falls away. Those written are, almost without exception, calculated self-publicity or versified notes expressing gratitude or affection.

Burns's poem to Miss Susan Logan (K139), the "sentimental Sister Susie" of the epistle to William Logan, is nothing more than a piece of polite versifying. It is the kind of verse, demanded by his status as a poet and by social convention, which increasingly occupied Burns in Edinburgh and, later, in Dumfries. The thought is commonplace, the expression equally mundane. The first poem written in Edinburgh which can legitimately be considered part of the epistolary canon is Burns's answer (K147B) to the verse-letter sent him by Mrs. Scott, the "Guidwife of Wauchope-House". Mrs. Scott, whom Burns was to meet on his Border Tour with Ainslie, was the niece of Mrs. Cockburn who had met the poet in Edinburgh in December, 1786 and had been favourably impressed, both by his physical presence and his manners. The epistle which she wrote to Burns is similar in tone to that sent by Mrs.

<sup>8</sup>Like a modern pulp novelist, Burns researches the topic which will form the basis of his novel: "I have laid in a good stock of new poetical ideas" (F., I, 126). This conception of composition is very different from the spontaneous actuality of events in Mauchline which prompted his greatest epistles.

Dunlop.<sup>9</sup> Both are examples of the way in which middle- and upper-classes indulged the whim of composition in Scots which Burns, by the example of his poetry and the magnetic attraction of his personality, had made fashionable. Scots song had always been an element in Edinburgh's "salon" culture, but an epistle such as Mrs. Scott's is an attempt to have some of his fame rub off on the correspondent by inviting a reply from Burns which he, in his dependent position, could hardly refuse to answer.

Mrs. Scott has obviously read her Ramsay and is well acquainted with the Kilmarnock edition, for at several points in her epistle (K147A) she strikes a note of close, defiant friendship and comic exaggeration which recalls the earlier poet's verse correspondence with Hamilton of Gilbertfield. She affects astonishment at Burns's sagacity and political insight; she refuses to believe that such detailed knowledge of politics and the 'beau monde' could have been gained by a ploughman, cut off from social intercourse and the counsels of the great:

I hafflins doubt, it is na' true, man,  
That ye between the stilts was bred,  
Wi' ploughman school'd, wi' ploughman fed.  
.....  
Ane maist wad swear ye dwalt amang them,  
An' as ye saw them, sae ye sang them. (ll. 2-20)

Burns knew that a large measure of his success was the novelty of his situation. He therefore took pains to maintain the image that was created for him. The account he gives in his reply of the growth of his poetic talent and his imagination is one example of this. In these lines, he is answering the implied challenge of Mrs. Scott's lines 5, 6 and 11 and 14:

<sup>9</sup>See Wm. Wallace, op.cit., pp.427-30.

GUIDWIFE,  
 I mind it weel in early date,  
 When I was beardless, young and blate,  
 An' first cou'd thresh the barn,  
 Or haud a yokin at the pleugh,  
 An' tho' fu' foughten sair eneugh,  
 Yet unco proud to learn. (11.1-6)

Burns recognized the combination in her epistle of wondering credulity and praise as both a compliment and threat of sorts. Compliment, in that it credits him with wisdom beyond that which his station in life would lead one to expect: at the same time, however, it is threatening in its misconception of the sources of his poetic power and its implied bursting of the bubble of Burns's image. Line 40, "A' honest Scotsmen lo'e the maud", seemingly innocuous, on closer inspection proves something of a warning.

Burns's patriotism before his visit to Edinburgh was intense but local in application. As he reveals in "The Vision ..." (K62) and in his epistle to Simson, he regarded himself as a local bard who celebrated the traditions and heroes of his native region, Kyle. To see himself as "Caledonia's Bard" was, at that point, beyond him.<sup>10</sup> However, after his arrival in Edinburgh, he was induced, willingly or unwillingly, to regard himself in this light.<sup>11</sup> The increased pressure of this burden of fame influenced the poetry he wrote and the manner in which he wrote it. He now had a certain position to uphold. Signs of this are the comparatively rare occurrence of vernacular forms and vocabulary, the increasing use of English, and his new-found interest in the Stuarts (who, like the Scottish Church and legal system, were to be favoured because they were distinctively Scots). The most ob-

<sup>10</sup>This title was first bestowed on Burns at a Masonic dinner soon after his arrival in Edinburgh. See F., I, 67.

<sup>11</sup>This change is exemplified in letters written to Mrs. Dunlop. In that of 15th November, 1786 (F., I, 50, 51) his poetic patriotism is restricted to celebrating a local Ayrshire hero, Wallace. In that of 22nd March, 1787, (F., I, 80-81) his patriotic ambition as a



vious sign of the changes which his new status implied for Burns's epistolary poetry is the highly revealing letter which he wrote to Dr. Moore (F., I, 104-16). Although it is essentially truthful, it is remarkable for the conscious structuring of facts in a way that suggests Burns was writing an autobiography appropriate to his new position and for the eyes of this connoisseur of human curiosities. In it, Burns is discovering himself afresh and taking stock of his position after the experience of cultural shock in Edinburgh. However, he is also composing a literary artefact for the entertainment of his correspondent. To this end, he varies chronology, omits details, and stresses certain important points as a response to his novel situation in the capital. For example, he makes much more of his humble birth in this letter than he has ever done before. In short, this prose letter has taken over many of the functions for which, in Mauchline, Burns would have used a verse-epistle. Increasingly, prose letters are the medium which he uses to offer his personal philosophy, his beliefs and hopes. Different prose letters are used to present different aspects of his personality, and the element of contrast, so common a feature of the verse-epistles of 1784 and 1785, is now to be found in the imagery of his prose letters. For example, depth and height, light and shade are the terms in which Burns conveys his conflicting views regarding the permanence of his fame in Edinburgh.<sup>12</sup> His desire to structure his life in this epistle according to his past history is revealing. He would appear to concede that a man is his past. He is what he has been. Not only poet has increased enormously. It is significant also that in writing to Dr. Moore (F., I, 85) Burns uses religious imagery to describe his forays into those parts of Scotland celebrated in song. He has been converted; his mission in life is to deserve the title of "Caledonia's Bard".

<sup>12</sup>See F., I, 55, 56; 59, and other letters from this period.

did Burns have to show to Edinburgh that he was able to hold the position chosen for him, but his re-interpretation of the sources of his poetic inspiration here suggests that he felt compelled to re-structure past events according to his new image. The Edinburgh epistles, therefore, have little self-revelation. They are, instead, advertisements of a sort. Burns uses this epistle to Mrs. Scott, as he does the prose letter to Moore, to create an image appropriate to his new situation in Edinburgh. In the light of this, it is not fanciful to suggest that he would regard her line 40 as a definition, if not a command, regarding the conduct and sentiment befitting "Caledonia's Bard".

Burns also wrote thus to satisfy the intense curiosity about himself in the capital. What he had previously confined to the pages of the First Commonplace Book, he was now making known to correspondents with whom he was little acquainted. How different is this poem from the verse-epistles written in Ayrshire. They were prophetic, utopian, visionary. Burns's imagination fed on the present and, thus nourished, leapt forward to envisage new worlds. In Edinburgh, he looks to the past to explain his present situation. The visionary quality is gone. Burns is content to consolidate what he is and has.

His explanation of the motivation for his verse is not convincing:

Ev'n 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.

The rough bur-thistle spreading wide  
     Amang the bearded bear,  
 I turn'd my weeding heuk aside,  
     An' spar'd the symbol dear.  
 No nation, no station  
 My envy e'er could raise:  
 A Scot still, but blot still,  
 I knew no higher praise.

(ll. 7-28)

Like the letter to Moore, this is an example of his re-interpretation of the events of his life as a result of his reception in Edinburgh. To have said "for poor auld Kyle's sake" would have been more accurate, but a sign of ingratitude. Similarly, one cannot imagine Burns the farmer writing to Rankine of the "rough bur-thistle" with such mawkish sentimentality.

Burns was conscious of the fascination he exercised over Edinburgh women, high- and low-born, and knew that it would not be diminished by the attitude he adopts towards them here. Free from the emotional entanglements of Ayrshire and uncommitted, as yet, in Edinburgh, he had every reason to boost his image by the gallant sentiments and frank flattery of lines like these:

Hale to the sex, ilk guid chiel says,  
 Wi' merry dance in winter-days,  
                   An' we to share in common:  
 The gust o' joy, the balm of woe,  
 The saul o' life, the heav'n below,  
                   Is rapture-giving woman.                   (11. 43-48)

With this unabashed masculinity, Burns reveals himself as an enticing and titillating prospect.

Burns's reply to Mrs. Scott is not so familiar as her letter to him; the choice of the more formal Scots stanza is the reason for this. His next epistle, to McAdam of Craigengillan (K150), is, however, much more so. This poem is a slight production, and it may be significant that in the three manuscripts of the poem which survive, Burns has included in the title the fact that it was written "in answer to an oblidging letter" sent by McAdam. It is as if Burns were concerned to claim no more for it than it merited. The epistle expresses his gratitude in the form appropriate to his trade. Just as an electrician might repay a debt of gratitude by re-wiring one's house, so, here, Burns uses his craft to produce an appropriate gift in return for McAdam's past support. The poem is jaunty, duly apprec-

iative, and complimentary to McAdam's family. In this, it resembles the second part of the epistle to Tennant of Glenconner. However, at the heart of the poem are two stanzas which introduce a different note. Throughout his stay in Edinburgh, Burns sensed, firstly, that his popularity could not last and, secondly, that patronage of the sort he was meeting with there was undermining his independence as man and poet. In lines 13-20, therefore, Burns reassures himself by telling this Ayrshire acquaintance that life in the capital has not gone to his head, nor has his independent spirit been diminished:

Tho', by his\* banes wha in a tub  
 Match'd Macedonian Sandy!  
 On my ain legs thro' dirt and dub,  
 I independant stand ay. -- (ll. 13-16)

Unlike his next epistle, to Tytler, in which Burns portrays himself a man alive to the latest controversies which are shaking the "salons", here he writes as one countryman to another. Though McAdam and he are at different levels on the social scale, their rural background unites them, and Burns is able to drop his defence and pretence for a moment in more familiar and self-revealing epistolary verse.

Burns's epistle to the Jacobite, historian, antiquarian, and collector of Scottish song, William Tytler of Woodhouselee (K152), is wholly English. It is saved from a disastrously formal start in an inappropriate stanza only by Burns's acute, flippant, rhetorical questions at the heart of the poem. His usually sound ear for the correct metre and stanza-form here deserts him entirely in lines 1-12. The jingling rhythms and feminine rhymes are hopelessly unsuited to this formal passage:

Tho' something like moisture conglobes in my eye,  
 Let no man misdeem me disloyal;  
 A poor, friendless wand'rer may well claim a sigh,  
 Still more if that Wand'rer were royal. (ll. 5-8)

Burns is all at sea in this affectation of sentimental pity.

His claim to be interested favourably in the Stuarts by reason of his ancestral inheritance resembles his support for Goldie as expressed in his epistle to that Kilmarnock "projector". At one level, he sympathized with their fate as he had with Goldie and identified the unjust attacks on him with similar criticisms of himself. At another level, however, open support for the man was a sign of his disaffection with Orthodoxy and a declaration of principle. The same is true of this epistle. Support for the Stuart cause was the act of a patriot and was to be expected of "Caledonia's Bard". Stanza three is another example of Burns's re-interpretation of his experience in the light of his reception into Edinburgh society. This need not imply that he was abjectly falsifying the facts of his life to curry favour with an influential audience. Just as his image of himself in Mauchline had demanded his making a stand on certain public matters of concern, so too the Marian controversy in Edinburgh elicited similar displays and prompted a verse-epistle such as this.

In lines 13-24, the poem improves after its lame start. There, Burns uses an effective, colloquial English in lines which are well-manipulated in respect of length and balance to match his impudent, jeering tone. His nose for hypocrisy was unerring and the whiff of sanctimonious gratitude in praise of the Hanoverians provokes a barrage of rhetorical question and studied indifference:

But why of that Epocha make such a fuss,  
That brought us th' Electoral Stem?  
If bringing them over was lucky for us,  
I'm sure 'twas as lucky for them! (ll. 17-20)

This open declaration of principle is followed by a conspiratorial stanza which, when coupled with the request in the prose letter (F., I, 88) that accompanied the poem, sounds like Burns's attempt to create an atmosphere of intrigue and divisiveness such as he had known in Mauchline. It is effective only within the confines of the poem, and has no re-

levance for the outside world. The fact that Burns uses lines 25-28 to convey information is a sure sign that this epistle is slight. The effect is as if what had gone before is a witty introduction for this message. Burns's decision to use the four-line stanza and his overwhelming reliance on monosyllables, as in line 31, precludes any possibility of his rounding off the poem successfully, and it fizzles out limply.

Tytler's interest in Scottish song may well have been another reason for Burns's writing to him. His enthusiasm is one example of an underlying current of serious interest in the Scottish literary tradition in Edinburgh at this time. Herd's valuable collections also manifested this appreciation and James Johnson, though essentially a music-engraver, provided the initial impetus which set Burns on what was to prove his most fruitful undertaking -- the imaginative reconstitution of the corpus of Scottish lyric poetry. The Crochallan Fencibles were another group whose interest in the vernacular (albeit a specialized aspect of it) Burns found welcome. The Scottish capital was not so totally subject to English taste as the examples of Mackenzie, Blair, and Beattie might suggest. Among all classes there was an appreciation of Scots lyric verse, and Mrs. Scott and Mrs. Dunlop reveal a familiarity with, and fondness for, the vernacular which makes it easier to understand Burns's ready acceptance. However, Scottish literature was to be studied by antiquarians, or enjoyed in the privacy of drawing-rooms where songs were sung to airs both traditional and non-native, or relished in the clubs and taverns where it was valued for its "low" or exclusively masculine associations. The vernacular was emphatically not to be encouraged or noised abroad as the sort of poetry by which Scotland should be represented in the eighteenth century. That would invite the criticism of parochialism from the English.

The doggerel which Burns addressed to Symon Gray and Renton of Lamerton (K155,156) cannot be considered epistolary verse in any meaningful sense of the word. These verses are symptomatic of the pressures which his fame imposed. He was badgered by poetasters who hoped to have some of his glory rub off on them. His life was complicated in a way that it had never been in Ayrshire where his company was sought by few and his reputation frightened off all but the closest friends. To men like Gray, he had to respond thus and give vent to anger long pent-up and stoked by many slights. On other occasions, however, he repaid debts of gratitude with professional slickness of an author autographing copies of his latest book in a promotional "stunt". He gave his signature with a characteristic flourish, and this was enough to please an uncritical audience.

Jane Ferrier had asked for a copy of one of Burns's poems, his elegaic verses "On the death of Sir J. Hunter Blair" (K160), and he enclosed a brief epistle (K161) when complying with her request. Apart from providing evidence of his compulsive flirting in the Edinburgh period, the epistle is a minor affair, and is of interest only as an example of Burns's professionalism. He could knock together an inoffensive poem swiftly and competently; in Edinburgh, many of the epistles he wrote made no greater demands than this. Burns had no models when writing epistles such as these -- they are the stock-in-trade of every poet who ever had an audience.

Burns's next epistles were also to a woman. Mrs. McLehose, Clarinda, was the wife of a Glasgow lawyer who had separated from her husband, and settled in Edinburgh in 1782 where she lived under the protection of her cousin, William Craig (later Lord Craig, when a Judge of the Court of Session). When confined to his room by injury in the winter of 1787/88 Burns began a fervent correspondence with this pert and vivacious woman. The fact of their physical separation allowed

her to indulge in her letters a taste for sentimental eroticism and religio-philosophical speculation from the inviolable safety of her room. The delay in confronting the physical threat which Burns, in person, posed gave their vicarious intimacy an opportunity to develop to a degree where each was more committed than was prudent. The "hothouse" atmosphere which Professor Fergusson detected in their prose correspondence is equally in evidence in those slight poems. With exaggerated desolation and forced artificiality, Burns rings the changes on Clarinda's pouting reproach, "But then -- you'd nothing else to do. --", in the first extempore epistle (K187). As in his stanzas on "naething" to Gavin Hamilton, he confronts a technical problem in ringing the changes on one word or phrase, but is not nearly so successful. Unlike that epistle, he offers here no world-view, no independent thought. It is a controlled response, and not an epistle. This fact of externally imposed conditions force Burns to contort his English into improbable patterns in order to complete the line with the same word:

For frowning Honor kept his post,  
To meet that frown he shrunk to do. -- (ll. 11,12)

There is, moreover, an excessive dependence on similar phrasal constructions like "Sylvander's raptur'd view" (1.2), "Clarinda's heavenly eyes" (1.5), and "Friendship's guarded guise" (1.7), and the ludicrous redundancy of a line like "Transfix'd his bosom thro' and thro'". Burns's problem is like that of a modern actor who, accustomed to working within the conventions of the sound film, is suddenly required to portray the same range of emotion within the very restricted medium of silent film. The gestures to which he would be reduced -- hand on heart for sincerity, rolling the eyes to convey grief -- are as predictable as Burns's attempt in this poem to wring the last drops of emotional appeal from stock phrases. The



emotional tension between Friendship and Love, Honour and Passion which the poem expresses was the dilemma which confronted Burns and Clarinda. She was married, and middle-class; this placed him in a novel emotional situation. However, the suspicion must be that, despite the allusive, gasp-with-affected-surprise correspondence in verse and prose, Clarinda was to Burns a woman like Betty Paton or Jean Armour who could be won round to compliance by a carefully-considered approach. The other short poem sent to Clarinda (K219) has no place in this study. It is nothing more than a toast sent by Burns to a woman whom he knew would soon form no serious part of his emotional life.

The Edinburgh interlude was drawing to a close. The second winter was not the heady round of balls and parties that the first had been. The novelty was wearing off as Burns had always foreseen. The affair with Clarinda was becoming mildly notorious, though this was a minor consideration in his decision to accept Patrick Miller's offer of the farm of Ellisland, near Dumfries. He was experiencing difficulty in obtaining his settlement for the Edinburgh edition from his tight-fisted publisher, Creech.<sup>13</sup> With this, he could give financial support to Gilbert and the family in Ayrshire, while retaining sufficient funds to free himself from dependence on Edinburgh. Early after his arrival in the capital, Burns had been offered patronage in the form which the literati approved: on his farm, like some Scots Horace, he could woo his muse at the plough-tail. But Burns knew that this alone would not sustain himself and a family.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, he

<sup>13</sup>Creech was not the publisher in the modern sense of that word, since Burns bore the risk of the Edinburgh edition. Literary agent would be a more accurate description.

<sup>14</sup>"I had intended to have closed my late meteorous appearance on this stage of Life, in the country Farmer; but after discharging some filial and fraternal claims, I find I could only fight for existence in that miserable manner, which I have lived to see throw a venerable Parent in the jaws of a Jail..." See F., I, 157.

now began to put into practice the scheme which he had earlier outlined to Mrs. Dunlop and which the interest of Miller and his friendship with Robert Graham of Fintry, a Commissioner of the Scottish Board of Excise, had made possible.<sup>15</sup>

In late February, 1788 he visited Ellisland with John Tennant of Glenconner who surprised him with his (erroneously) favourable opinion of the farm. Towards the end of April, he gave Jean Armour "a legal title to the best blood in [his] ... body; and so farewell Rakery!"<sup>16</sup> At this time also, he was taking instruction in excise business at Mauchline to fit him for a vacancy, should one arise, and by 13th June, he had spent his second day on his farm above the Nith. In Edinburgh he had sensed that he had "no continuing city", and he welcomed the Excise scheme as "a certainty of maintenance". (F., I, 223, 229). In settling "on the banks of the Nith", he intended to emulate the "old Patriarchs ... and get Man-servants and Maid-servants, and flocks and herds, and beget Sons and Daughters".<sup>17</sup> This is a very different utopia from those envisaged in Mauchline, but it, too, proved unattainable. However, since Miller's offer of a farm seemed to solve various pressing problems, not the least of which was his desire to return to the life he knew and valued, he welcomed the opportunity.

The final epistle of this period to be considered (K222) is that which Burns wrote to Hugh Parker, brother of the Kilmarnock

<sup>15</sup>"I have dallied long enough with life; 'tis time to be in earnest ..." See F., I, 81.

<sup>16</sup>See F., I, 222. Phrases like this are significant. Burns was clear that a chapter in his life had ended.

<sup>17</sup>See F., I, 221.

banker, William Parker, and an old Ayrshire friend. It was most probably written in mid-June, 1788, at which time Burns was travelling constantly between Mauchline and Ellisland. At the farm, he was having a house built in which to install his wife when it should be ready and was living temporarily in a "hovel" which he had taken over from the outgoing tenants. He was harrassed by the variety of troublesome detail he had to attend to. He found himself isolated in what seemed like a foreign country.<sup>18</sup> The change from eighteen months of relatively "soft" living in Edinburgh to this hardship unnerved him, and at no other point in his correspondence does he make so much of his physical discomfort. However, the irks of the body were not his only cause of disappointment and remorse, as this epistle suggests. The move from Mauchline to Edinburgh had been a change indeed: that from Edinburgh to Dumfries was a watershed in Burns's life. Here, he was no celebrity. Now, he was a married man with onerous responsibilities. He knew that he might well have to resort to the Excise for a sufficient income and must therefore do nothing to invite a reputation for disaffection or unreliability. He was, moreover, lonely, unsettled, and for the first time in his life, was finding the composition of verse difficult. In Dumfriesshire, he was "an entire Stranger in the ... country" (F., I, 214). This confessional epistle reveals this feeling of strangeness and shows his apprehension of the consequences for his poetry.

It opens with the same slow concentration of focus which Burns had used in the opening stanza of the "Epistle to Davie". He moves from the panoramic to the precise. In the first six lines he elabor-

<sup>18</sup>This sense of isolation is to be found in most of Burns's letters of this period. See, among many others, F., I, 240 and 228: "... in Ayrshire I have several [varia] tions of Friendship's Compass, here it points in [variably] to the Pole ..."

ates the notion of "... this strange land, this uncouth clime", highlighting aspects of the distaste which he feels for it. It lacks any tradition of literary achievement in which he can take pride -- "A land unknown to prose or rhyme". So lost is it that it does not even figure in prose annals! Lines 3 and 4 seize on this barrenness. It has not inspired any verse, not even the poor verse which would have been inevitable if composed in such an inhospitable atmosphere. Burns makes much of physical imagery in the epistle, but it is the physicality of the maimed or defective - prose is drunk; sight is limited; and he himself is dwindled down. In physical terms alone, the land is unhealthy and barren. This epistle tells of Burns's forty days and nights in the wilderness; it remains to be seen whether he will emerge fortified or beaten by the experience.

At the heart of the introductory passage we find the poet, "ambush'd by the chimla cheek". The hearth is no longer the symbol of comfort which it had been in the first epistle to Sillar. It tells, instead, of Burns's situation. He is lost in a fog; he senses that he is in the midst of a crowd in Dumfriesshire, but he remains apart from them, cut off as if in a fog. It also introduces the traditional imagery of poetic creativity and energy -- fire. Before he elaborates this, however, he further stresses his boredom and isolation by reference to another of the senses, hearing. He is conscious of the monotonous "thrum" of a spinning-wheel:

I hear a wheel thrum i' the neuk,  
I hear it -- for in vain I leuk. -- (ll. 9,10)

Line ten has a suitably sardonic air of resignation, of making a poor joke out of a bad situation. This excludes any suggestion of self-pity and allays the bitterness at the core of the poem.

Burns's loneliness and sense of uprootedness at Ellisland is conveyed in lines 11 and 12:

The red peat gleams, a fiery kernel,  
Enhusked by a fog infernal:

The fires of creativity merely glow. There is nothing and no-one to fan them into flame. They are threatened with extinction by the barrenness of his surroundings, and the emptiness of his social life. The word "infernal" should not be regarded as comic exaggeration of the smoky atmosphere. When one recollects the high value which Burns placed on the word "blessed" in his Mauchline epistles, especially in the "Epistle to Davie" echoes of which abound in this poem, to call this "fog" by its antonym suggests that more than just his senses are stifled. His whole being is in a Slough of Despond.<sup>19</sup>

Burns's past experiences and novel situation had meant that he needed to "bring about a revolution in his ... own mind" (F., I, 217). In this wilderness, he was scrutinizing past actions and examining future prospects:

Here, for my wonted rhyming raptures,  
I sit and count my sins by chapters; (ll. 13, 14)

Poetry had been his great support and the source of his popularity. However, deprived of the appreciative encouragement of his Mauchline friends or the admiration of Edinburgh audiences, and "Wi' nae converse but Gallowa' bodies", he can find no succour in the one activity which had elsewhere brought him happiness and fame. He merely exists.

This section is the low point of the poem. But, with typical contrariness, the tour-de-force of a wild ride which Burns envisages for Jenny Geddes in the following lines gives the lie to his profession of emptiness. The thought of what he has achieved and has suffered without flinching inspires him to create and to entertain:

<sup>19</sup>Confirmation for this may be found in the first paragraph of the letter sent to Mrs. Dunlop within a few days of this epistle. See F., I, 226-27.

Was it for this, wi' canny care,  
 Thou bure the Bard through many a shire?  
 At howes or hillocks never stumbled,  
 And late or early never grumbled? -- (ll. 23-26)

What follows is as deliberate a piece of comic writing as the ludicrous comparisons deliberately introduced into his prose letter to Alexander Cunningham:

I laid down my Goose-feather to beat my brains for a pat simile and had some thoughts of a country Grannum at a family-christening; a Bride on the market-day before her marriage; an Orthodox Clergyman at a Paisley Sacrament; and Edinr. Bawd on a Sunday<sup>20</sup> evening; a tavern-keeper at an Election-dinner; &c. &c. &c...

Burns wishes, "had I power like inclination", and then proceeds to give proof of both in lines 27-36. The poem just as quickly swings from the zany back to the serious as he examines his immediate future in lines 37-40. It is significant that he most laments his inability to write an epistle which will amuse and entertain his correspondent:

Wi' a' this care and a' this grief,  
 And sma', sma' prospect of relief,  
 And nought but peat-reek i' my head,  
 How can I write what ye can read? -- (ll. 37-40)

Here is the dilemma which confronted Burns in Edinburgh, now confronts him in Dumfries, and which is at the heart of the relative failure of his epistolary verse after Mauchline. What sort of poetry can he now write, cut off, as he is, from his most appreciative and understanding audience and from the society and atmosphere which best nourished his creative talent? These were questions which, in respect of his epistolary poetry, he did not solve in Edinburgh. This epistle holds out the hope that he would find a new style or a new audience. For the present, he is content to envisage the Masonic celebration in Mauchline as an occasion on which he can forget his worries. However, the poem closes on a note of doubt which the characteristic flash of fantastic humour in lines 28-36 does little to allay. Burns was now permanently

<sup>20</sup>See F., I, 243-44.

settled in "this strange land", and visits to Mauchline on which he could recharge his emotional and poetic batteries would not always be possible. He became reconciled to life in Dumfries by channelling his energies into an activity which was at once patriotic and self-satisfying -- lyric poetry. However, although his epistolary verse never again plumbed the depths of the Edinburgh period, it was not, as the following chapter will demonstrate, the essential, vital means of expression which it had been in Mauchline.

## Chapter Five

The epistles which Burns wrote at Ellisland and Dumfries between 1788 and his death in 1796 are many and varied and may, for convenience, be divided into four groups. One such grouping can be classed as trifling; these epistles are little more than versified notes to friends and acquaintances. These poems are the hasty scribbles of a busy man, expressing gratitude, requesting a favour, or replying to a letter. They have all the slickness and ease of a calculation on a pocket computer: the correct response is forthcoming when the correct buttons are pressed. Another grouping comprises those epistles which are predominantly, though not entirely, English in conception and expression. Almost all of these were addressed directly to Burns's most influential correspondent in his last years. Robert Graham of Fintry, a Commissioner of the Scottish Board of Excise. The epistles to this man are petitionary poems or fervent expressions of gratitude. Usually, they are written in imitation of some aspect of the classical English tradition, partly because Burns hopes thus to give his poem an added lustre by setting it within a tradition which his correspondent would recognize, as he had done with the "Standart Habby" epistles in Mauchline. However, such poems are to be seen also as experiments -- Burns was testing his range and satisfying the demands of patrons who wished him to produce work befitting the national bard. Graham of Fintry had to be flattered and impressed, and these poems are among Burns's most laboured productions. In them, he presents images of himself and of his ideas and hopes which he knows will appeal to his correspondent. If he is satisfied, Burns has attained his objective. The wishes of the patron have to be respected, but this patron was no longer Gavin Hamilton nor Burns the iconoclastic bachelor of Mauchline.



A third grouping resembles those epistles which Burns wrote in Mauchline in 1786. They are amusing and show the same gloss-finish of technical expertise. There is in some of these poems, as there was in "The Inventory", an element of virtuoso self-indulgence. Burns's professional curiosity has been excited by a technical challenge, and he rises to it with relish. However, although some of these poems exhibit characteristic flashes of Burns's thought, the development of these epistles is controlled by external circumstances. Burns is a craftsman working to admittedly testing specifications. What the poems lack is the insight and urgency of the artistic vision. That is to be found occasionally in the poems of the final group where, as in Mauchline, Burns uses the epistle to discover himself in his new surroundings, to fix his position relative to his society, and to give expression to truths won from experience. Nevertheless, these poems do not convey the same impression of spontaneous discovery nor do they have the visionary confidence of Mauchline. The tone is elegaic and reflective. Burns looks to the past and draws from his experience ideas which, though flippantly expressed, have universal application because Burns is, in his final epistle, Everyman. As they were written, these poems never had the same potential area of influence as the Mauchline epistles. There, he was writing to persuade not only his correspondent but all who chose to hear his philosophy. The epistles of the final group seek only to explain his failure or justify the choices he has made.

In epistolary verse, as Burns received the English and Scots traditions, self-expression is tempered with consideration of the nature and demands of an audience. To the extent that these two factors meet in a precarious balance, great poetry can be written. The epistolary poet needs to know that his statements, ideas, and emotions are directed at an audience who can respond, and so confer on them a status

higher than that of mere interesting and revealing monologue. The epistle is a dialogue in which the audience, be it one man or many, is the other speaker. One never hears that other voice except as the poet creates it, but in the greatest epistles one is acutely conscious that self-expression is directed towards an audience whom the poet can readily conceive. In the Dumfriesshire epistles Burns's awareness of the audience, as in the case of those to Robert Graham, often bulks so large as to crowd out and effectively prevent expression of an individual viewpoint. And if "audience" is used in a wider sense to imply the society in which they were written, the Dumfries epistles are seen to be subject to restrictions which were inevitable, given the nature of Burns's position within that society and given that society's values and prejudices. It is, therefore, important to examine briefly those factors in Burns's life in Dumfriesshire which can be seen to have affected his epistolary verse. This is not to regard the epistles as the reactions of a rat in an experimental maze where an electric shock administered here and a gate opened there produces a predictable response. Rather, it is to recognize that epistolary poetry is a social verse-form. There must be some form of audience just as there must be a poet, and from this interaction poetry, good or bad, is written.

There is better documentation of the years 1788 to 1796 than at any other period of Burns's life; the difficulty is to relate this mass of biographical information to the epistolary verse which Burns produced then. The relationship cannot often be exact. Rarely is one able to isolate a particular incident and point to the poem which resulted, and even then that is no complete explanation of that particular set of verses. The connection between the two is more difficult to define but can best be approached in terms of the changes which Burns's situation imposed on him and how he adjusted to this new society and new correspondents. Burns's reaction to the rash of Scots

Poetry which flooded the market after his Kilmarnock and Edinburgh editions; the conditions, physical and intellectual, which his work as an Exciseman imposed upon him; his uneasy relationship with certain sections of society in the self-contained little world of Dumfries; how the minority-viewpoint bias of epistolary poetry was an inappropriate form of expression for Burns's position in society -- these topics offer valid insights into the relationship between Burns and his audience, into the crucible out of which his epistolary poetry flowed.

Working the farm of Ellisland was exhausting but necessary. Burns had guessed that Miller's motives were based on a Horatian stereotype and suspected from 1787 that the farm would prove a ruinous bargain. In that he was proved correct and, in 1791, was only too happy to be relieved of a burden which had demanded greater efforts for diminishing returns. The letters from Ellisland tell of Burns's struggle with the farm. He makes much of his physical labour and discomfort because he had already foreseen the day when he would be forced to reject this patronage to survive and was concerned lest his refusal to continue with the farm confirmed an unwarranted reputation for shiftlessness and instability.<sup>1</sup> Burns wanted it to be known that he had made an effort.<sup>2</sup> The letters also tell of the effect of this drudgery on his poetry.<sup>3</sup> Ellisland was isolated and Burns was a stranger in the country. After the rush of the first summer and autumn, his existence was more settled but

<sup>1</sup>See F., I, 347: "... leaving the farm so soon may have an unsteady, giddy-headed appearance".

<sup>2</sup>This is the point of the detail that he is "... driven in with his ... harvest-folks by bad weather ..." in his letter to Margaret Chalmers. See F., I, 256.

<sup>3</sup>"I have scarcely made a single distich since I last saw you". See F., I, 218.

he still knew nothing of this new world to which he had been transplanted. He found his farming neighbours boorish. After the cultured sophistication of the capital and the closeness of friendships in Mauchline Ellisland was a wilderness in which little epistolary poetry, or any kind of poetry, could be written.<sup>4</sup> He had no intimate knowledge of this society nor did his correspondents in Edinburgh and Ayrshire. The raw material of his verse -- human nature and human experience -- was in short supply.

As early as 1786, Burns had contemplated the Excise as a source of steady income and, as his fears regarding the farming venture had grown, so had the appeal of the idea.<sup>5</sup> With the help of influential friends, especially Graham of Fintry, Burns had undergone instruction in this complex and demanding occupation with the result that, in July, 1788, he received his Excise commission and was able to assume the post of Officer of Excise in September, 1789. This change of occupation from farmer to the socially-stigmatized gauger was Burns's response to the responsibilities which marriage and children had thrust upon him. The tenor of his prose letters concerning this "revolution" is such that he seems to be defending himself against charges of squandering his talent, or of having let the side down.<sup>6</sup>

His appointment to the Excise radically altered the course of the last years of Burns's life. At first, it proved physically demanding.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>"In my Professional line, too, I want you much ..." See F., I,301.

<sup>5</sup>"There is one way by which I might be enabled to extricate myself from this embarrassment ..." See F.,I,253.

<sup>6</sup>See the defensive stance of his letter to Ainslie, for example, in F.,I,364.

<sup>7</sup>"I am a poor, damn'd rascally Gager, condemned to gallop at least 200 miles every week ..." See F.,I,6.

Burns had to travel widely on business which was intricate and which would be scrutinized carefully by experienced superiors. He had consequently, less time for cultivating acquaintances or for sustained creative work.<sup>8</sup> This interpretation is supported by the manuscripts of longer poems composed in Dumfries. For several, there are multiple drafts, as Burns revised, refined, and reworked in an effort to achieve an elusive Augustan balance and polish.

His work as an Exciseman had its pleasant side, however. After the isolation of the farm it brought Burns into contact with a great many more men and women, something which Burns, with his amused relish of all levels of society enjoyed.<sup>9</sup> Through the medium of the Excise, he also formed his most convivial friendships. Men like Syme, Findlater, and Mitchell soon welcomed him as a crony, but, significantly, such friendships never prompted verse like that which he addressed to his Mauchline acquaintances. This was partly a result of the fact that Burns met them often and easily. He was no longer tied to the rhythms of the farm as he had been in Mauchline where he had to write to reach his audience. When he was promoted, he had rather more leisure and opportunity for talk, and, consequently, less need for epistolary communication. However, although Burns's philosophy had altered little, it could not find expression in epistles to men like these. For them, liberty was the opportunity to sing a bawdy song or to ogle a serving-girl without fear of reproach. Such actions in a military town like Dumfries, long accustomed to the rollicking behaviour of

<sup>8</sup>"... I am totally unfit for wielding a pen in any generous subject." See F.,II,48.

<sup>9</sup>"Another advantage I have in this business is, the knowledge it gives me of the various shades of Human Character ... " See F.,I,379.

soldiers stationed there, were not the deliberate acts of rebellion which they would have seemed in Mauchline. Moreover, these men were his superiors in Government service and this fact -- that he was a Government employee in a time of revolution scares and threats of invasion -- constrained and restricted Burns. Epistolary poetry is the form for the individual voice, the minority (and in the Scottish tradition) anti-authoritarian viewpoint. Burns's appreciation of this aspect of the epistolary tradition in the work of Pope and in the verse-correspondence of Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield had made the choice of "kind" in Mauchline obvious. In Dumfries, however, the restraint which Burns had to exercise in all forms of expression -- speech, reading, writing -- and the caution with which he had to choose his correspondents made epistolary verse a less inviting form.<sup>10</sup> The opportunity for cathartic self-expression in verse-epistles was denied him.

His conception of poetry, and especially of vernacular poetry had undergone a significant change since Mauchline. The success of his Kilmarnock and Edinburgh editions had ultimately disillusioned him.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he realized that satirical poetry, such as he had written in the close community of his Ayrshire village, had little effect in the wider world. He was willing to spring to the defence of the Rev. William McGill, but realized that his opponents were too strong and too secure to be worried by his satirical verse.<sup>12</sup> As a poet, he is no longer the

<sup>10</sup>Burns's incompatibility with the taste of certain sections of Dumfries society is revealed in a letter to Peter Hill, the bookseller, in which he requests certain "heavy Performance[s]" for the members of the Monkland Friendly Society and goes on to ask for numerous editions of dramatic authors in English and French (F., II, 15). Such requests are a measure not only of Burns's increased wealth, but are also a sign that his intellectual life was increasingly internalized.

<sup>11</sup>"... my success has encouraged such a shoal of ill-spawned monsters to crawl into public notice ... that ... Scots Poetry, borders on the burlesque". See F., I, 311, 12.

<sup>12</sup>"Alas! I am not a Hector, and the worthy Doctor's foes are as securely armed as Ajax was". See F., I, 349.

guerilla behind enemy lines. He now sees himself as a cavalry officer charging a tank. Skilled, daring, glorious -- but futile.

The swarm of trivial and, on occasion, embarrassingly parochial vernacular verse which was published in an attempt to capture a share of Burns's glory sickened him, and he took less and less interest in vernacular verse, concentrating instead on reconstituting the body of Scots lyric poetry. To this, he devoted himself enthusiastically, prodding one tardy editor and defending the integrity of the songs collected against the financially-motivated tampering of the other. This work was the only good consequence of his regarding himself as "Caledonia's Bard". His work for Johnson and Thomson was a self-effacing patriotism. He accepted no payment, but was committed to collecting and respectfully re-creating what he could of Scots song for his country.<sup>13</sup> In Mauchline, his belief in the necessity of poetry and its function in society had been expressed in epistles. But, after his meeting with Johnson in Edinburgh, although this conviction remained firm the expression of it took a different form. It is not fanciful to see his work in this field as an extension of his Mauchline views on poetry. In these songs, he is providing the opportunities for imaginative release, for fun, for catharsis. He no longer uses the epistle to persuade his audience that his theory is correct, and he is no longer the example or the proof. Like the Provos of Amsterdam who had argued against the domination of the motor-car in the urban centre to no avail until they hit on the idea of leaving clusters of white bicycles at strategic points for anyone to use, so Burns offers Scotland the means

<sup>13</sup>"There is a work going on in Edinburgh, just now, which claims your best assistance. An engraver ... has set about collecting and publishing all the Scotch songs ... I have been absolutely crazed about it ... " See F., I, 134.

of saving itself or finding itself again by providing it with song.<sup>14</sup>

If this was one outcome of Burns's position as "Caledonia's Bard", the other less fruitful result was the changes it caused in Burns's attitude to composition.<sup>15</sup> Soon after he arrived in Ellisland, he begins to lay in a store of books with which he will educate himself and so prepare himself for the great work that lies ahead.<sup>16</sup> Throughout this period, and despite his criticisms of Edinburgh friendships and offers of advice, Burns was trying to produce poetry which would appeal to the Anglified taste of a cultural elite. Although his Mauchline epistles were never scribbled down "aff loof", they were intended to give that impression. Now, however, Burns is concerned to stress the effort and care expended on the works he is undertaking, on the imitations he is attempting, on the projects that he has planned.<sup>17</sup> One is led irresistibly to the conclusion that the fun and high-spirits have gone out of his verse. He was making himself ready to attempt tasks which were appropriate for one of his status. This need not imply that all Burns's English poetry of this period is bad, simply that he could not excel in that essentially alien, though familiar tradition as he could so easily in Scots.

Criticism of Burns's epistolary verse must take account of

<sup>14</sup>Burns's fervent patriotism and the desire to be judged by posterity, as expressed in the letter to Johnson of November, 1788, support this interpretation. See F., I, 275.

<sup>15</sup>See Burns's shrewd appreciation of his predicament in F., I, 379-80. How could he sustain the reputation he had gained? By more ambitious, more "serious" work?

<sup>16</sup>See F., I, 290 on his "hundred different Poetic plans!"

<sup>17</sup>For example, see his letter to Cunningham (F., II, 54) in which he says that he has "these several months been hammering at an Elegy on ... Miss Burnet".



his interaction with the very different society in which he found himself. In certain respects, Dumfries resembled Mauchline, or any other town. There were, in Syme and others, like-minded acquaintances with whom he could share a common taste for bawdry, talk, and drink. There were also opportunities for conviviality and female companionship, although with regard to the latter, Burns now seeks solace rather than sexual adventure. There is less of the roistering blade in the Burns of Dumfries.

He welcomed the combination of feminine concern and intellectual stimulation which he found in the company of Maria Riddell and in the voluminous correspondence of Mrs. Dunlop. However, there were social minefields in Dumfries less easy to negotiate. Although the exact location, nature, and personalities of Burns's quarrel with the Riddells remains obscure, the fact of the rupture marks the poet as a man whose acceptance into the society of gentry is conditional on his maintaining a decorous propriety in mixed company. What would have been excused as over-indulgence in a fellow-landowner is damned in the gauger and the poet.

Burns himself was increasingly conscious of his social position in the town of Dumfries, however, and enjoyed towards the end of his life the respect of several prominent citizens. Nevertheless, his letters and the occasional verse-epistle reveal that he felt himself trapped, but resigned.<sup>18</sup> He was never entirely at ease in Dumfries because his ideas, his philosophy of life, his entire spirit urged him to protest, but his need to retain his position and maintain influential friendships forbade him.<sup>19</sup> This tension could well have been productive, as the cyn-

<sup>18</sup>See his nostalgic dwelling on happier times in F.,II,231,32.

<sup>19</sup>He could and did, however, give vent to his feelings in the privacy of his prose correspondence. See F.,II,270.

ical opening stanzas of an early draft of his election epistle to Graham of Fintry reveals.<sup>20</sup> However, Burns does not pursue this theme and produces instead a catalogue of names in which the references ~~are~~ too localized and the allusions too narrowly aimed at Graham to make a truly effective poem today, although the sour tone is unmistakable.

Dumfries was a fairly large, comfortable town, loyal to the monarchy and patronized by the military and the lesser aristocracy. Here, Burns had to curb his natural spontaneity in verse and action for, as his being reported to the Board of Excise as disaffected in December 1792 showed, there were those who wished to see him fall. He was not, therefore, free to use the verse-epistle for self-expression as he had been in Mauchline, and he missed the perceptive intelligence of like-minded friends such as Hamilton and Sillar in Ayrshire and Cunningham and Cleghorn in Edinburgh. In Dumfries, he had not the independence which Pope enjoyed at Twickenham. Burns had ties of family, of position, and of occupation to constrain him. Nor did he have the sense of an audience who were knowledgeable and committed to his ideals. Syme, Graham, and others expected entertainment above all else. Nor was he concerned about the welfare of this region of Scotland to which he had been transplanted and in which he did not feel at ease. That sort of patriotic concern is to be found in Burns's lyric poetry. Songs, too, seem to have provided Burns with the cathartic outlet which epistles formerly did. Each man can appropriate to himself the emotion conveyed in a song, yet this does not rob it of its universal application. This union of individual insight and overall significance which Burns had cherished in the Mauchline epistles is now to be

<sup>20</sup>See "Epistle to Robt. Graham Esq: of Fintry ..." (K318). The lines occur in the Alloway MS, entitled "Sketch".

found in his lyric composition. His conception of the epistle's role is reduced. It can be a hasty scribble, a practical method of procuring advancement, or an opportunity to display virtuoso skill. Only on rare occasions does he use it as a verse-form capable of combining personal opinion and universal truths.

Among the hasty scribbles mentioned above are poems such as those "To Mr. John Taylor" (K245), "To Mr. McMurdo ... " (K261), and "[To Peter Stuart]". These are uniformly trivial. They are no more than the scant record of Burns's social life in Dumfries. To include them in this study is merely to recognize that they were written by Burns and sent to a correspondent. The motivation for such verse comes from Burns's desire to amuse or entertain friends in the best way that he was able, and examples of such poems may be found throughout his poetic career. Nevertheless, it is significant that more such poems survive, in this epistolary form or in others such as epigram, from this period of Burns's life than any other. They are a mark of Burns's more varied social life, but "epistles" such as that "To Captn. G[ordon], ..." (K437) and those to Robert Riddell (K528,529) demonstrate that poetry was the only coin in which Burns could repay his debts.<sup>21</sup> As a poet in Dumfries, Burns was expected to produce verse such as this. In the same way, a popular audience is disappointed if a man, who is recognized as a genius, cannot name the players in a successful football team. It is a conception of poetry and poets very different from that which Burns had advocated in his Mauchline epistles and though not of his making, he succumbed to it in Dumfries because he had no choice.

<sup>21</sup>See F., I, 345: "... it is none of my least incentives to rhyme that it gives me an opportunity ... of repaying that hopeless debt of kindness and friendship ..."

The mundane good wishes of the epistle "To Terraughty, on his birth-day" (K325) are entirely conventional; in stanza four especially, Burns seems merely to be shuffling well-worn counters into a pattern which will please the recipient of the epistle:

But for thy friends, and they are mony,  
 Baith honest men and lasses bony,  
 May couthie fortune, kind and cany,  
   In social glee,  
 Wi' mornings blythe and e'enings funny  
   Bless them and thee:-       (11.19-24)

The repetition of line-pattern in lines 20 and 23 and the banal epithets throughout -- "couthie", "kind", and "cany" suggest the work of a man who could write this sort of verse without thinking. This is no more distinguished than the conventional work of men like Boyack or Nicol earlier in the century. Burns pulls the handle, the tumblers click into place, and there appears in the tray an epistle such as this. In a similar class are the lines "To Chloris" (K506), that is Jean Lorimer, which Burns inscribed on the leaf of a copy of his 1794 edition which he sent as a gift. To compare these lines on friendship with those of the first epistle to Sillar on the same subject is unthinkable. One recognizes that Burns was not only writing here to a very different correspondent and that he wrote out of a different tradition, but one also accepts that the epistle to Sillar is a serious poem and that this is nothing more than a professionally executed compliment. Epistles such as these are like the jokes which a professional comedian might buy. One can find them in the repertoire of any eighteenth-century Scots poet, exposed to both the English and Scottish traditions. Poetry is reduced to the level of a social skill, like knowing which knife to use for fish.

The epistles which Burns wrote to Robert Graham of Fintry ought to be examined as a group because, taken together, they reveal much about the pressures on the poet in Dumfries. An epistle as sycophantic

as "To Robt Graham of Fintry Esqr., with a request for an Excise Division -- "(K230) which Burns worked on doggedly in August and September of 1788 when troubled by the probable failure of his farming venture demonstrates how radically the responsibilities and changes in his life alter his epistolary practice.

The essential difference between the epistles to Graham and those of the Mauchline period is that in the latter Burns used his technical skills to convey and embody truths which he had discovered and needed to convey. In this epistle to Graham the need to persuade is, if anything, more pressing since the happiness of others is dependent on the poem's effect. However, what Burns wishes to convey now is not a discovered truth but a manufactured image, poured from a conventional mould, which he needs his correspondent to buy. This epistle has all the exaggeration and histrionics of door-to-door salesman who is paid according to the volume of his sales. Not only does Burns falsify the image of the poet, but he tries to persuade Graham, by the language and style of the epistle, that he will be saving a national asset -- "Caledonia's Bard".<sup>22</sup>

Burns's urgency may be judged by the grossness of his flattery of a man whom he hardly knew and by the quite false image of the poetic spirit which Burns presents:

Creature, tho' oft the prey of Care and Sorrow,  
When blest today, unmindful of tomorrow,  
A being formed t'amuse his graver friends,  
Admired and praised -- and there the wages ends;  
A mortal quite unfit for Fortune's strife,  
Yet oft the sport of all the ills of life;  
Prone to enjoy each pleasure riches give,  
Yet haply wanting wherewithall to live;  
Longing to wipe each tear, to heal each groan,  
Yet frequent all-unheeded in his own. -- (ll. 30-40)

<sup>22</sup>See F., I, 253-54. This prose letter is the same mixture of effusive flattery, calculated appeal, and rationalisation as the verse-epistle. His letters to Graham of Fintry are uniformly flattering; such was Burns's appreciation that he was responsible for the welfare of others.

Burns's experience and knowledge is here falsified to make a calculated appeal to a man who can be of service. When compared with the central position which the poet held in society in Burns's Mauchline epistles, one recognizes in this depiction of the poet as a man without a role, as a court-fool, a hyper-sensitive spirit unfitted for the rough-and-tumble of existence the sort of gross misrepresentation of facts usually reserved for defence counsel. Burns is trying to persuade his correspondent to act in his interest. He is not compelled, as he was in Mauchline, by a sense of the freshness of his discoveries or the need to have others share his insight. The epistle is a carefully-planned assault on Graham's humanity and patriotism.

It is deliberately modelled on Pope's philosophic epistles. Burns writes in the English epistolary tradition because that is the tradition which Graham will want to patronize; this epistle will reveal Burns as the sort of poet whom he, Graham, in his role of cultural benefactor, will wish to save for the nation. Burns's purpose is blatantly obvious throughout. The specious argument of the philosophical introduction is tricked out with a panoramic sweep and the pseudo-scientific terminology of classification, but the image of Nature as a baker or clay-modeller in lines 15 and 16 remains ludicrous. The balance and artful construction of the section quoted is intended to convey measured judgement, but this peroration is immediately recognizable as the calculated appeal which, in fact, it is. The image which Burns chooses for the relationship of poet and patron is mawkish and uncomfortably physical. Though he talks of the "propless Climber" and "a Standard-tree", one is not persuaded by the imagery to forget that he is talking of himself and Graham, with the result that the picture of Burns embracing his patron is unfortunately always present.

Burns's calculating construction is continued in the balanced juxtaposition of "the tuneful Muses' hapless train" and those

"Who feel by reason and who give by rule" (l.59). This echoes contrasts encountered in the Mauchline epistles, but the juxtaposition is made here for a rhetorical purpose and no other. After seventy lines of effusive flattery Burns, with a ham actor's inability to sound convincing, draws back as <sup>of</sup> horrorstruck, to warn Graham of the existence of such beings as designing sycophants. Of course, he has never met any:

But, there are such, who court the tuneful Nine,  
Heavens, should the branded character be mind!  
Whose verse in manhood's pride sublimely flows,  
Yet vilest reptiles in their begging prose. (ll. 75-78)

The epistle closes with an absurd protestation of independence which is obviously sham. Burns crams in affecting physical detail as the beggar turns out his pockets to convince one of his poverty:

E'er my poor soul such deep damnation stain,  
My horny fist, assume the Plough again;  
The pie-bald jacket, let me patch once more;  
On eighteenpence a week I've lived before. -- (ll. 89-92)

This epistle is, fortunately, atypical. Even Burns's other poems to Graham, though hardly distinguished, never plumb these depths again. It was doomed to failure by Burns's inexperience in handling this metre, but his unease is manifested in other ways. The bathos of lines 21 and 22, the clumsiness of expression in line 66, and the compressed "wit" in lines 51 and 52 show Burns to be working within a tradition which he had not mastered and which he did not fully understand.

The fragment (K265) which Burns wrote to Graham on his appointment is, if anything, more effusive in its praise, but, mercifully, short. The other wholly English epistle sent to his patron is "To R\*\*\*\*\* G\*\*\*\*\* ... " (K335). Written when Burns was injured in 1791, it is a curious mixture. Again, Burns presents an image of the poet that is calculated to gain Graham's sympathy; again the poem relies heavily on the English tradition of philosophic epistolary

verse; and again the plethora of manuscripts or manuscript fragments which survive suggest that Burns revised and revised to create an impressive performance. Not only could it be used to sway Graham, but it could be shown to others who wished to see him attempt this form of poetic undertaking.<sup>23</sup>

One's first reaction to the self-indulgent pity of the opening and the exaggerated and strained series of comparisons in lines 9 to 22 is that Burns is being ironic. He must be poking fun at the more ridiculous aspects of the conventional petitionary poem, as he did in "A Dedication ...". This, however, proves not to be the case. Burns is as calculating in this poem as in his first petitionary epistle to Graham, and in his over-eagerness to please, he produces a poem which is artificial and forced. One knows the self-abasement of lines 23-26 to be a deliberate falsification. The image of the poet as defenceless, weak, damned by his peculiar sensitivity to suffer where lesser mortals cannot feel is the result of Burns's reading in sentimental literature and his unfamiliarity in handling such a rhetorical tradition. Like an opera-singer straining for a high note, Burns over-pitches his appeal on comparisons which are ludicrous and which occasionally topple over into the bathetic:

No horns, but those by luckless Hymen worn,  
And those, alas! not Amalthea's horn:  
No herves olfact'ry, Mammon's trusty cur,  
Clad in rich Dulness comfortable fur. (ll. 29-32)

He is not alive to the sound of this verse, nor has his reading in Dryden and Pope saved him from clumsiness of expression and the re-

<sup>23</sup>Parts of this epistle had been shown to Mrs. Dunlop as early as 1789 (F., I, 283), and Dugald Stewart and Dr. John Moore also received fragments (F., I, 288; 285). The explanation which accompanies the lines sent to Moore reveals the composite nature of the epistle. Burns originally intended this poem to be a history of the poet's mind. Instead, he presents a conventional image designed for maximum effect.



petition of phrases of similar structure. "Fortune's polar frost" (1.59) and the two examples in the lines quoted above recall identical structures in the "Address to Edinburgh" (K135).

The poem differs from the great epistles of the Mauchline period in that it is determined by Burns's calculation of his correspondent's wishes and his complete surrender to that specification. The epistle is an example of Burns's "manufactured" work in Dumfries. The lines on Creech and Smellie which some manuscripts contain were written years before, and the letters to Mrs. Dunlop charting the progress of the poem reveal a Burns who believed he was organizing a major work of some significance.<sup>24</sup> In fact, it is neither. Although it exhibits an occasional striking phrase or image, the poem as a whole demonstrates the malign influence of alien standards of taste which Burns had been told in Edinburgh were socially and culturally desirable, and the way in which his dependent position in Dumfries adversely affected his epistolary verse. For such calculation and considered abjectness as this, Burns was unfitted by temperament and tradition.

A more profitable area for his talent would have seemed to be the elections for parliament held on 12 July, 1790, but the epistle (K318) which Burns wrote on this is disappointing. It is episodic and local, and does for Graham in poetry what he had previously done in prose.<sup>25</sup> Burns writes a series of pungent "caractères" for a man whose local knowledge will allow him to recognize the accuracy and satiric wit of each. Except for the two final stanzas, Burns refuses to open the poem out and extend his insights into the area of wider human

<sup>24</sup>See F., I, 266; 268; 283, 84.

<sup>25</sup>See F., I, 371-72.

endeavour. This is largely because his position in Dumfries would have made the development of the theme of cynicism and bribery in politics dangerous, as the rejected stanzas in the Alloway manuscript demonstrate. The image of the poet sketched there ought to be compared with the smug, safe, retiring portrait in lines 115-120:

But where shall I gae rin or ride,  
That I may splatter nane beside?  
I wad na be uncivil:  
For mankind's various paths and ways,  
There's ay some doytan body strays,  
And I ride like the devil. --

.....

Suppose I take a spurt, and mix  
Among the wilds o' Politicks,  
Electors and Elected:  
Where dogs at Court (sad sons o' bitches!)  
Septennially a madness touches  
Till all the Land's infected. --  
(Alloway MS, ll. 7-12 and 25-30)

Burns's talent for seizing on a local incident and treating it in such a way that he can draw from it truths or warnings of universal importance is frustrated because, as he tells us, such insight would be too strong for his audience to accept. An epistle which had continued in the mood of the lines above would have been a very different poem. The epistle which he finally drafted is a series of in-jokes, none too malicious but restricted in potential appeal.

The final epistle of this group is not addressed to Graham of Fintry but was written out of spite to satisfy Burns's bitterness at the estrangement from Maria Riddell in January, 1794 as a result of the obscure incident in December 1793 during which Burns offended some female member(s) of the Riddell family. The poem is Burns's satiric re-working of the Ovidian epistle in the manner of Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard". It is not especially effective as satire for, like others of Burns's epistles which are wholly English in conception, it manifests his inability to handle the convention with the care and linguistic

precision demanded. Burns wishes to have the added irony of contrast with Pope's poem, but his deliberate echoing of that poem means that one is comparing Burns with Pope to the detriment of the former. Burns attempts to pack too much anger into a small compass for the epistle to be successful; one catches him drooling over the smartness and point of his attacks:

What scandal call'd Maria's janty stagger  
The ricket reeling of a crooked swagger?  
What slander nam'd her seeming want of art  
The flimsey wrapper of a rotten heart -- (ll. 45-48)

It is a relief to turn from this forced, antithetical wit to the third group of epistles which Burns wrote in Dumfries. One breathes a healthier air.

"[To Alexander Cunningham]" (K225), "[To William Stewart]" (K255), and "[To a Gentleman who had sent him a News-paper ...]" (K282) resemble most closely those epistles written in Mauchline in 1786. They are technically competent and amusing, although the flash of serious thought which is occasionally reflected, as from a distance, in each poem is a habit of mind.

That to Alexander Cunningham is written, as the letter in which it is included makes clear, in grateful response from the isolated poet to an entertaining and uplifting letter from one of the Edinburgh acquaintances whose friendship proved durable.<sup>26</sup> It is a "stag-night" joke in which Burns makes poetic capital out of the contrast between carnal and spiritual love. He takes this no farther than the level of bawdy humour. In a more serious poem, Burns would have made more of the potential for satire inherent in the perverted, revealing logic of "But, 'God is love; the Saints declare,/ Then surely thou art God-like!" (ll. 3,4). In this slight poem, it is only the first of a series of contrasts and exaggerations which forms the humorous core of the

<sup>26</sup>See F., I, 237-38.

poem. For this purpose, the stanza which Burns has chosen is eminently suitable. The rhyme-scheme allows him to make one self-contained statement in the first two lines of a stanza, and he can then overtop it or reverse it by a second unit of meaning in the remaining two lines. In stanza four, for example, the construction is like a game between two equally-matched chess players:

Prudence, the Bottle and the Stew  
 Are fam'd for Lovers' curing;  
 Thy Passion nothing can subdue,  
 Nor Wisdom, Wine, nor Whoring. -- (ll. 13-16)

The opening gambit of lines 13 and 14 is countered by the response in lines 15 and 16; the result is an impasse which prepares one for the "drastic" remedy suggested in stanza five:

Thy Wounds such healing powers defy;  
 Such Symptoms dire attend them;  
 That last, great Antihectic try,  
 Marriage, perhaps, may mend them. -- (ll. 17-20)

Unobtrusive skill such as this is also to be found in the epistle to William Stewart (K255). This is a more serious poem than that to Cunningham. The repetition of the same idea in the final line of each stanza slows the pace of the poem; it has the stark intensity of Dunbar's spare "Lament for the Makaris", with its death-knell refrain. There are, moreover, subtle temporal variations, as Burns contrasts his present situation with the future in stanzas one and two, and his past with the envisaged future in three and four to give the impression of being trapped in time. The epistle is expressive of the isolation and despair which Burns experienced in his early months at Ellisland. Its form and technique of repetition are strongly reminiscent of the extempore epistle to Gavin Hamilton (K99). But the sombre, resigned tone of this epistle is Burns's recognition that there is now no possibility of escape. Alcohol is no longer the symbol of conviviality and liberation. It is now a refuge. Burns is digging in to face the winter.

The final poem of these three recalls the zany lists of "The Inventory". Like that epistle, an external stimulus provides the occasion for Burns to show his mettle by devising an exhaustive list of world events. With the phrase "This mony a day I've grain'd and gaunted, To ken ... ", Burns opens the flood-gates and pours forth a rich stream of satire and ribald humour. The disrespectful, jeering familiarity of Burns's vernacular reduces world-shattering events to the level of village gossip. Unsurprised and unimpressed, Burns surveys the current balance of power and political intrigues in Britain and Europe with ill-concealed contempt. The poem, but for the final four lines, is one long sentence, dependent on the main clause of lines 4 and 5. This is a sign of Burns's technical expertise, but the reductive juxtapositions and deliberate vulgarity also reveal a secondary intention -- to mock the great-folks and their world:

How cesses, stents, and fees were rax'd,  
Or if bare a--s yet were tax'd;  
The news o' princes, dukes, and earls,  
Pimps, sharpers, bawds, and opera-girls;  
If that daft buckie, Geordie W\*\*\*s,  
Was threshin still at Lizzies' tails,  
Or if he was grown oughtlins douser,  
And no a perfect kintra cooser, (ll. 27-34)

This cynical review of world affairs is Burns's artistic expression of feelings which he gives emphatic statement to in his letter to Mrs.

Dunlop:

... your men of the world, ... when they talk of right and wrong, they only mean proper and improper; and their measure of conduct is not what they ought, but what they dare.<sup>27</sup>

Increasingly, the prose letter and not the verse-epistle is the form in which Burns develops his ideas and expresses his sentiments.

The final group of epistles are those which Burns wrote to Blacklock (K273) in response to a poetic epistle from the blind poet;

<sup>27</sup>See F., I, 18-19.

to Findlater (K281) to accompany a present of "caller, new-laid eggs"; to Mitchell (K514) to request, as a favour or repayment of a debt, "ONE POUND, ONE"; and to his commanding-officer in the Dumfries Volunteers, Colonel De Peyster (K517). Of these, though all are linked by a common stanza-form, only the final "Poem on Life" to De Peyster approaches the Mauchline epistles in its combination of serious purpose and levity of tone.

That to Blacklock is unimpressive in respect of content. It is nothing more than Burns's versified, half-apologetic response to his blind correspondent's kindly inquiries -- "How keeps thy much lov'd Jean her health?/ What promises thy farm of wealth?" (K273A, ll. 15,16). As a comparison of Burns's reply with Blacklock's epistle reveals, Burns is content to answer his requests for information, but does no more. He veers slightly from his purpose with a burst of anger at Heron and introduces an element of conventional moralizing in lines 43 to 48, but the poem is flat and dull. His handling of this sprightly stanza-form is pedestrian:

I hae a wife and twa wee laddies,  
 They maun hae brose and brats o' duddies;  
 Ye ken yoursels my heart right proud is,  
   I need na vaunt;  
 But I'll sned bosoms and thraw saugh-woodies  
   Before they want. --                  (11. 31-36)

At times, too, the language is archly sentimental and false:

Ye glaiket, gleesome dainty Damies,  
 Wha by Castalia's wimplin streamies  
 Lowp, sing, and lave your pretty limbies,  
   Ye ken, Ye ken,  (11. 25-28)

In mitigation, it should be remembered that Burns was writing under pressure, but on similar occasions in Mauchline (the third epistle to Lapraik, for example) Burns managed a more successful poem.

The epistle to Findlater is significant for its recollection of imagery used in his epistle to Rankine. The cock is the symbol of strutting masculinity, and the morality of Nature is Burns's alter-

native to the "cursed CLERICAL EXCISE", an image which reveals Burns's ambivalent attitude to his occupation. He must bow to necessity for he has a family to support, but he deeply resents being the enforcer of an arbitrary authority. With this image, "Nae cursed CLERICAL EXCISE/ On honest Nature's laws and ties", Burns is recognizing that he is on the wrong side of the barricade.

The poem to Mitchell is unremarkable except for that expression of congenial flippancy with which Burns is determined, in his epistles, to regard life's grave issues:

Ye've heard this while how I've been licket,  
 And by fell Death 'maist nearly nicket;  
 Grim loon! he gat me by the fecket,  
And sair he sheuk;  
 But by good luck, I lap a wicket,  
And turn'd a neuk. (ll. 19-24)

He turns a near-fatal illness into a humorous bagatelle that he might easier approach a friend for a sum of money.

With artistic fitness which perhaps ought to have been expected in one who, for a time, regarded the manner in which he lived his life as symbolic, Burns's final epistle is certainly the best which he wrote in Dumfries. Though very different in tone from the Mauchline epistles, it can bear comparison with them. De Peyster is addressed with ease because, in common with all men, he must ultimately face the same situation as Burns finds himself in. The inclusiveness of stanza five insists that Burns's view of life has universal application. It is an elegaic poem. As in his "Epistle to a Young Friend", Burns surveys his experience of life to offer general truths. The epistle combines a manly fatalism with resentment that life should be a game in which one's opponent always has loaded dice.

Life has finally trapped Burns. Surrounded by "bolus pill,/ And potion glasses", he can view the world realistically and without vanity:

Dame Life, tho' fiction out may trick her,  
 And in paste gems and frippery deck her;  
 Oh! flickering, feeble, and unsicker  
                                 I've found her still.  
 Ay wavering like the willow wicker,  
                                 Tween good and ill.       (11. 13-18)

The poem has an air of finality which is not solely derived from its circumstances of composition, but owes more to the fact that the majority of stanzas are statements: they read as established truth. Wishing is futile: Life is deceptive: Satan is waiting. The core of the epistle is a series of gnomic statements, each of which is elaborated with the defiance of an artist who wishes to leave something substantial to throw in the teeth of time.

Throughout the epistle, man is a dupe, a helpless animal or insect, easily tempted and easily caught. However, the sombre tone is dispelled by the nostalgic recollection of stanza five. Here, Burns speaks for fallible humanity, but in such a way that the horrible details which follow seem an almost reasonable price to pay. In line 25, Burns talks as if to an old adversary whom he has encountered before and whose methods of fighting he ironically deprecates. The restrained, precise imagery of lines 27 and 28 reflects the Devil's subtlety, but the key to the poem is "tempting ware" (l.26). With this phrase, the Devil is reduced to the level of manager of a nightclub, flashing at passers-by pictures which are meant to tempt one to enter. In the following stanza, he is the ravenous spider, reeling in each hapless victim with demented glee. Finally in lines 37 to 42 Burns, as in "Tam o'Shanter ...", presents a lurid and graphic image of supernatural terror. However, as we now recognize, this is melodrama. The lights have dimmed, the voice dies away on a grisly note, "As dangling in the wind he hangs/ A gibbet's tassel" (11. 41,42), and the audience is hushed.

Burns's final epistle is a subtly humorous performance, but



it has a serious intent. It recalls the prose letter which Burns sent to his dying friend, Robert Muir, in an effort to comfort him:

If we lie down in the grave, the whole man a piece of broke machinery, to moulder with the clods of the valley -- be it so; ... Every age and every nation has had a different set of stories; ... a man, conscious of having acted an honest part among his fellow-creatures ... goes to a great unknown Being who could have no other end in giving him existence but to make him happy; who gave him those passions and instincts, and well knows<sup>28</sup> their force. -- ... It becomes a man of sense to think for himself.

Burns presents to De Peyster the conventional notion of sin. Man's life is a series of temptations which, unless resisted, will lead to his downfall. Burns's disagreement with this view was absolute, as the letter to Muir makes plain. Life was not something which demanded such rigidity of purpose or such calculation. Life was God-given and to be enjoyed. Therefore, as the voice dies away Burns floods the poem in light, and reveals his ironic intention throughout. He had consistently refused to regulate his life according to the fear of Hell. Rather, he had lived it, or so he firmly believed, according to God's will. He therefore closes his last serious epistle with an appeal for salvation to the Lord who granted him life for living.

<sup>28</sup>See F., I, 207-08.

## Chapter Six

### Summary

In my thesis I have attempted to prove three things. Firstly, that the tradition of the verse-epistle in eighteenth-century Scotland was more complex and varied than previous studies of the period have allowed. Secondly, that Burns's verse-epistles can be read profitably and with understanding only if they are viewed in the context of the various societies in which they were written and in the light of Burns's contemporary situation. Thirdly, that those epistles written in Mauchline between 1784 and 1785 comprise his most substantial achievement in this form and are, with the exception of the songs, his most successful, coherent body of work.

Burns's verse-epistles represent an exciting and refreshing extension of a favourite eighteenth-century poetic "kind" which, by the end of that century, was rapidly becoming conventional in its Scots and English forms. Pope and Prior in England, Hamilton of Bangour and Ramsay in Scotland were the poets whose epistolary verse formed the models which later writers in each country slavishly imitated. It was Burns's genius to recognize the merits of each and unite them in a stanza, "Standart Habby", which, by virtue of its historical development and its traditional associations was particularly fitted to convey individual insight by recreating the varied register of voice and living speech.

In Pope, Burns learned of the high moral duty of the poet as censor, critic, and defender of the minority belief. Although he differed from the English poet in almost every other respect, they were united in their commitment to the idea that the poet's role in life was both practical and symbolic, and that the incisive expression of one man's philosophy could have consequences for society. This urgency, this compulsion to explain and convey his message informs the Mauchline

epistles of 1784 and 1785. They exude a liberating confidence which is not simply to be explained by the strength of Burns's conviction, but which also owes much to Burns's mastery of "Standart Habby" and his perceptive borrowings from the varied epistolary tradition available in eighteenth-century Scotland. Pope's Horatian epistles swing from defence to attack, from self-justification to self-advancement, and Burns's reflect the ebb and flow of a quicotic, quicksilver mind as it speculates, questions, challenges, and scorns. From the correspondence of Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield, he learned of the anti-authoritarian bias of the epistle. It was the poetry of a tightly-knit group, a rebel band, and as such was ideally suited to the divided society of Mauchline. However, Burns learned his craft at the feet of Fergusson. The existence of several good poems in "Standart Habby" in eighteenth-century Scotland has been noted, but there was none to match him in his union of polished technique and intellectual toughness. With his example, Burns knew that serious ideas need not be presented with the gravity or ponderous movement of Juvenalian satire. Flippancy and a smooth ease of expression could also convey ideas of universal significance.

In Mauchline, a unique combination of circumstance, personal experience, and a particularly appropriate verse-form combine to make the epistolary poetry written there so memorable and effective. In other societies and under different circumstances, Burns does not regard the epistle in the same light. In Edinburgh, he was too unsettled, too guarded, and too conscious of the need to conform to standards of taste not his own to consider the epistle as a suitable means of self-expression or social commentary. In Dumfries, the role of the epistle in Burns's life was increasingly filled by the prose letter and by song, which was his practical expression of the need for imaginative

freedom and for "fun". In Dumfries, more than in Edinburgh, epistolary poetry of the sort written at Mauchline was impossible, given his occupation, his responsibilities, and the values and loyalties of the society in which he then lived. More than at any other time, therefore, he writes according to models which he had encountered -- partly as an experiment, and partly to satisfy the expectations of his correspondents. The epistles of this period are more varied in style but less distinctively individual. Many of them, one feels, could equally well have been written by Ramsay or by poetasters like Nicol, and those in English by any Scots poet who had pretensions to the culture of the South.

Burns, in his lifetime, and his reputation since suffered from his having written such fine epistolary verse at the outset of his poetic career. After such an *éclatant* beginning, the rest would inevitably be an anti-climax. Certainly, he never again achieves that combination of technical brilliance and freshness of insight. Never again does he manage so wide a range of voices, nor so confidently offer his solutions. These poems are rightly-constructed and none more so than his longest epistle, to Smith, yet they succeed in convincing that they are the spontaneous, ongoing expression of a lively mind. In Mauchline, in his epistolary poetry, Burns reached conclusions about himself, about society, about religion, and about the responsible role of poetry with startling suddenness and in circumstances which demanded their memorable expression. After that, the role of the epistle was increasingly subordinate to other verse-forms such as lyric, or was seen as a form of entertainment, or as a useful practical poetic tool.

However, this ought not to detract from Burns's achievement in the Mauchline poems. Though later epistles rely heavily on traditional models or are prompted by financial consideration (as many in Dumfries were), the Mauchline epistles remain among the most

innovative, exciting, and important poetry of the century. The imagery of freedom and release and the vigour and zest of the language implies a commitment to imaginative freedom worthy of comparison with Blake or Dickens. They express Burns's insight into the insidious mechanization of the spirit and his distaste for rigidity and excessive formality in relations between people. He has the same unerring nose for hypocrisy as Byron and, like the later poet, has the happy knack of seizing on the felling physical image and exactly the right note of parody to convey his scathing anger. His epistles are not the dramatic monologues of Browning, although sections of them pack into a small space the tell-tale changes of tone and of pace which hint at things unstated. Burns is always conscious of an audience, even in his least original epistles -- that explains their failure. In those poems, the audience determines the argument or the expression of the epistle, and robs him of the opportunity for independent creativity.

This concern to be heard, and to communicate to others the myriad possibilities inherent in life -- possibilities for that complex idea, "fun", for humour, for the expression of one's humanity -- gives his greatest epistles their continuing importance. The appeal of lines such as these is as powerful today as it was then. To resist this call is to deny one's humanity:

An anxious e'e I never throws  
 Behint my lug, or by my nose;  
 I jouk beneath Misfortune's blows  
                   As weel's I may;  
 Sworn foe to sorrow, care, and prose,  
                   I rhyme away.

O ye, douse folk, that live by rule,  
 Grave, tideless-blooded, calm and cool,  
 Compar'd wi' you - O fool! fool! fool!  
                   How much unlike!  
 Your hearts are just a standing pool,  
                   Your lives, a dyke!

Nae hare-brain'd, sentimental traces,  
 In your unletter'd, nameless faces!  
 In arioso trills and graces  
                                   Ye never stray,  
 But gravissimo, solemn basses  
                                   Ye hum away.

Ye are sae grave, nae doubt ye're wise;  
 Nae ferly tho' ye do despise  
 The hairum-scairum, ram-stam boys,  
                                   The rattling squad:  
 I see ye upward cast your eyes --  
                                   -- Ye ken the road --

Whilst I -- but I shall haud me there --  
 Wi' you I'll scarce gang ony where --  
 Then Jamie, I shall say nae mair,  
                                   But quat my sang,  
 Content with You to mak a pair,  
                                   Whare'er I gang. ("To J.S\*\*\*\*, 11.145-74)

## Appendix One

### Burns's Verse-Epistle to Dr. John Mackenzie

This poem was first published, with minor errors of transcription, in the Burns Chronicle by J. C. Ewing.<sup>1</sup> He gave as his source a transcript in the hand of Dr. John Mackenzie in the Watson Collection (MS 585, No. 1086) in the National Library of Scotland. The poem was reprinted by James Barke in 1955, but was subsequently rejected by Professor Kinsley, as having been "admitted ... to the canon of Burns's work, either wrongly or on inadequate evidence."<sup>2</sup> Since Kinsley's edition appeared, Burns's autograph MS of the first eight stanzas has been found. It was bought by the Trustees of the Burns Monument, to whom I am grateful for permission to print the stanzas below. In this version of the poem, the first eight stanzas are my transcript of Burns's faint MS; the remaining five stanzas are taken from Dr. Mackenzie's copy in the Watson Collection:

Dr. Thinker John,

Your creed, I like it past expression,  
 I'm sure o' truth it's nae transgression  
 To say the great Westminster Session,  
                                 Wi' a' their clatter,  
 In carachess, or large confession,   5  
                                 Ne'er made a better. -

For me, I ken a weel plough'd rigg  
 I ken a handsome hizie's leg,  
 When springing taper, straught an' trig,  
                                 It fires my fancy;   10  
 But system-sandy-mills to bigg,  
                                 Is nae that chancy. -

<sup>1</sup>J.C. Ewing, "Epistle to Dr. John Mackenzie [?] By Robert Burns," Burns Chronicle, 2nd ser., 12 (1937), 15-18.

<sup>2</sup>Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, ed. James Barke (Glasgow: Collins, 1955), pp. 263-65; Kinsley, *op. cit.*, p.929.

Sma' skill in holy-war I boast;  
 My wee-bit spunk o' Latin's losst, 15  
 An' Logic gies me ay the hoaste,  
                     An' cuts my win',  
 So I maun tak the rear-guard post,  
                     Far, far behin'. -

I see the poopet, ance a week, 20  
 An' carefu' ev'ry sentence cleek;  
 Or if frae ... a smirkin keek  
                     Spoil my devotion,  
 My carnal een I instant steek  
                     Wi' double caution.-

Still, tho nae staunch, polemic-head 25  
 O' lang-win'd, Athanasian breed,  
 I hae a wee-bit cantie creed  
                     Just o' my ain,  
 An' tho uncouthly it may read,  
                     It's unco plain. - 30

Tho' human-kind be sae at odds,  
 Poor, waspish, animated clods!  
 There's just twa patent turnpike-roads  
                     They a' maun gang  
 To dark FUTURITY'S abodes, 35  
                     The right an' wrang. -

If, spite of a' its crooks an' thraws,  
 The heav'n-ward road your fancy draws;  
 If ye resemble ought their laws -  
                     And ways that's there; 40  
 Then march awa an' never pause,  
                     Your conduct's fair. -

But if ye think within yoursel,  
 Ye'll fairly tak your chance o' h-ll;  
 An' honestly your notion tell, 45  
                     Free, unashamed;  
 Then faith, I see na how that, well,  
                     Ye can be blam'd. -

But here the conduct I call evil;  
 Some at their heart wad sair the d-v-l, 50  
 Yet groan, & drone, an' sigh, and snivel,  
                     An' pray & cant,  
 An' be to heaven as fair an' civil  
                     As ony saunt.

Thae rotten hearted twa-fac'd wretches, 55  
 Wi' a' their hypocritic fetches,  
 I would rejoice in well-splic'd stitches  
                     O' hempen string  
 Out owre a tree, the sons o' bitches,  
                     To see them swing. 60



Ye see my skill's but very sma,  
 Some folk may think I've nane ava,  
 But we sall gie our pens a claw  
                                 Some ither time,  
 An' hae a bout between us twa                                 65  
                                 At prose an' rhyme.

Farewell, dear death-defying John!  
 Aft hunt-the-gowke for you he's gone,  
 But some day he'll come down the loan  
                                 Wi spurtlin shanks,                                 70  
 An' grip ye till he gar you groan,  
                                 By way of thanks.

But first, before that come to pass:  
 May ye toom many a social glass,  
 An' bless a dear warm hearted lass                                 75  
                                 That likes you some;  
 Then after fifty simmers grass  
                                 E'en let him come!

Signed Rab Ryhmer [sic],

18th April 1786.

Although Burns's poem is not addressed specifically to Mackenzie, it seems certain that he was the recipient intended. Internal evidence may be adduced to support this. The phrase "death-defying John" (l.67) recalls, as Ewing noted, the final four lines of his only other poem to Mackenzie, the invitation to attend the Masonic "grand Procession" in Mauchline, in June 1786 (K114). However, a more telling fact is Mackenzie's own statement that he and Burns had had "some correspondence ... on the origin of morals" at the approximate period when, if we are to trust Mackenzie's date of 18th April, 1786, this epistle was written. Mackenzie's reference to this discussion of morality is in a letter he sent to the nineteenth-century editor, Chambers, explaining the phrase, "a blade o' Johnie's Morals" in the Masonic poem by Burns referred to above.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Burns's epistle abounds in references to a system of morality. It is, in fact, the central theme of the poem. Is a personal morality,

<sup>3</sup>The Life and Works of Robert Burns, ed. Chambers, rev. Wallace (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1896), I, 378.

freely arrived at, any the less valid than those theological systems and standards of morality dogmatically laid down by Church authority? References to "Your creed" (1.1), "system-sandy-mills" (1.11), and stanzas seven and eight, are convincing evidence that Burns was here responding to his discussions with Mackenzie.

Mackenzie first became acquainted with the poet in 1783, when he attended his father in his last illness. Fellow-membership of the same Masonic Lodge, Tarbolton (St. James), meant that the initial wariness of their relationship grew into a close friendship. Mackenzie admired Burns's poetry, and by introducing him to the influential Dugald Stewart and Sir John Whitefoord, paved the way for his Edinburgh success. Burns writes from the capital in terms of gratitude, thanking Mackenzie for his interest, and assuring him that the gamble of supporting him has paid off.<sup>4</sup> He continued to assist the poet on his return from Edinburgh in 1788 by providing a room in his house in which Jean Armour, pregnant a second time, and Burns might take refuge. In short, Mackenzie was one of the intelligent, convivial liberals with whom Burns increasingly associated and became identified in Mauchline. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Burns should be, in April 1786, writing to him on the themes of morality, religion, and hypocrisy.

In April 1786, Burns had published his Proposals, For Publishing By Subscription, Scotch Poems and had also been rejected by Jean Armour's father as an unsuitable husband for his daughter by reason of his poverty and notoriety.<sup>5</sup> Both these events should be remembered when reading this epistle. The pride of the author-to-be is reflected in the signature, "Rab the Ryhmer" sic, and the

<sup>4</sup> F., I, 63-64.

<sup>5</sup> See Burns's introduction to his transcript of the letter to John Arnot, F, I, 26.

bitterness which Burns experienced on his rejection gives an added bite to ll. 49-60 which are, for Burns, unusually violent in imagery and expression.

The ideas of the poem are typical of the way Burns's mind worked in Mauchline. The battle-lines are clearly drawn, and he thinks only in terms of opposing forces and alliances. Personal morality is contrasted with the rigidity of established creeds; open-hearted honesty confronts sly hypocrisy; life is opposed to death, the wide road with the narrow, experience and spontaneity with learning and calculation. Such contrasts and swings of emotion are the thematic expression in verse of Burns's experience of village life in Mauchline. They may be found, to some degree, in all of his early epistolary poetry, as can the skill with which he constructs this poem. The range of his voice is managed expertly. It alternates between the self-deprecation of stanza three and the violent denunciation of ll. 55-60. Burns denies his competence in systematic morality in stanzas two and three, digresses with ironic humour in stanza four, only to define starkly the choices which each man must make between good and evil, and then to refine it in ll. 49-54 by demonstrating the greater evil of hypocrisy.

The poem ends with an appropriately masculine, not to say Masonic, note of fraternity in the face of life's trials, but the epistle is, despite this conventional ending, unusual in several respects. Firstly, there is a curious awkwardness in certain stanzas. For example, in ll. 55-60 the syntax of the final four lines is contorted out of all recognition, either under pressure of anger, or to fit the rhyme-scheme. The ending, too, is curiously flat. One knows that Burns could have discovered a much better line 76 than these dull monosyllables, "That likes you some". Secondly, the poem's

vocabulary is unusual. Burns often drew on non-Ayrshire dialect words to create a flexible, synthetic Scots, but he formed new compound-words infrequently. The phrase, "red-wat-shod", in the epistle to Willie Simson (K59) is a rare and successful example. In this poem, however, "polemic-head", "system-sandy-mills", and "hunt-the-gowke" occur within the space of sixty lines. Of these, the second is most unusual. To "bigg sandy-mills" is to "job-nob with". It would seem, therefore, that Burns is using the phrase in its literal, as opposed to its colloquial, sense - to "build sandcastle-systems". This certainly has the effect of belittling doctrinal creeds, but at some cost to one's immediate understanding and to the vernacular. Thirdly, Burns's spelling, usually accurate and consistent, is here, at times, so unconventional to merit the description inventive, as in "carachess" (1.5), "losst" (1.14), and "hoaste" (1.15). These unconventional elements suggest that this epistle was either written in haste, under pressure, as was possible in the hurried days of April 1786, or that the text we have represents merely a first draft, yet to be refined and tidied or, possibly, sent to Mackenzie for his opinion.

However, characteristic habits of expression and phrasing can be paralleled in other epistles by Burns. Stanza three's modesty recalls ll. 31-32 of the epistle to John Goldie (K63), and the wide-eyed honesty of ll. 43-48 is similar to the unashamed avowals of ll. 43-46 in the epistle to M'Math (K68). The imagery of war and of divergent roads which controls the poem's development reveals Burns the "poet-militant", as he writes with increasing confidence and anger from his embattled situation in Mauchline. He needed the safety-valve of epistolary composition to survive. In Mackenzie, he found a receptive and sympathetic correspondent.

## Appendix Two

### Burns and Freemasonry

Burns's association with Freemasonry began on 6 July, 1781 when he was entered as an "apprentice" in the minutes of the Lodge St. David (Tarbolton) Kilwinning. This Lodge had been formed in 1781 by the "junchen" of two Lodges, Lodge St. David and Lodge St. James. The union was short-lived, and on 27 July 1784 Burns was elected Depute-Master of the St. James Lodge. He was an active and efficient member until 1788 when, as a result of his move to Ellisland, his name appears no more in the minutes. However, he remained closely associated with Masonry throughout his life, in Edinburgh, on his "tours" in 1787, and again in Dumfries. The purpose of this brief appendix is to suggest that Freemasonry had a significant influence on Burns's ideas concerning religion and society, on his practice as a poet, and on his social situation in Mauchline and Edinburgh particularly.

The Club, if not an eighteenth-century invention, was brought to perfection then. Few figures in English literary history did not then belong to some form of club, frivolous or serious, and Burns was no exception. The Tarbolton Bachelors' Club was an early attempt by Burns, and other village-lads, to shape their behaviour and taste on the model of similar institutions in Edinburgh or London. There, they could cultivate a studied politeness, discuss literary-philosophic matters, and indulge the exuberance and irresponsibility of youth. In Edinburgh, conviviality, bawdy, and an appreciation of Scots song were the attractions of the Crochallan Fencibles. In that society, Burns could escape from the stifling standards of an Anglified Edinburgh

into a world which had more in common with Fergusson and Ramsay, or the "ram-stam" boys of Mauchline. However, neither of these organisations is as important in his development as membership of that other "club", Freemasonry.

Freemasonry in Mauchline, as elsewhere, had its practical and benevolent aspect, but, given the social mix of a Lodge which could include ministers, lairds, and tenant-farmers, it also had an obvious appeal as a means of advancement for an ambitious young poet. There, Burns was to meet influential men who would assist him in his legal difficulties, aid him in the publication of the Kilmarnock edition, and provide him with the valuable introductions which smoothed his way in Edinburgh. In the capital, he was introduced to the Canongate Kil-winning Lodge, the most influential and socially select of all Scottish Lodges, and was "assumed a member". He also found himself the guest of the St. Andrew Lodge, where he was toasted as "Caledonia's Bard, brother Burns".<sup>1</sup> On his Border Tour with Ainslie in 1787, Burns was advanced free of charge by the St. Abb's Lodge, Eyemouth, "on account of his remarkable poetic genius". He spent two days at Blair Atholl during his Highland Tour with William Nicol, dining with John, Duke of Atholl, Grand Master Mason of Scotland. In Dumfries, too, he kept up his association with Freemasonry.

The importance to Burns of the Masonic contacts formed in Ayrshire and Edinburgh is undeniable, but these were no more than the "perks" of membership, and, as such, do not come at the real influence of Freemasonry on Burns. Its attraction for the poet lay elsewhere. In Mauchline, Freemasonry offered Burns a practicable model of the alternative society which forms one of the main concerns of his verse-epistles in that period. The ideals of Freemasonry were very similar

<sup>1</sup>F., I, 67.

to those which Burns elaborates in his epistles to Sillar, or Lapraik, or Smith. He valued the fraternal conviviality of the Lodge and its declared lack of factional interest in politics or other controversial questions. This policy is expressed in one of the Masonic "Charges" read out "At the making of New Brethern!" "Therefore no private piques or quarrels must be brought within the door of the Lodge, far less any quarrels about Religion, or Nations, or State-policy, we being only, as Masons, of the Catholick Religion above-mentioned!"<sup>2</sup> This is one aspect of the Masonic concern with fraternity, and was immediately appealing to Burns. One consequence of this, and also a powerful attraction for Burns in Mauchline where he felt persecuted by the followers of a bigoted and unnatural ethical creed, was Freemasonry's refusal to attend to distinctions between religious factions, and its insistence on the moral law as the supreme arbiter of human conduct. One charge expresses this ideal thus, "... as Masons, we only pursue the universal religion, or the religion of nature: this is the cement which unites men of the most different principles in one sacred band, and brings together those who were the most distant from one another," and the first "charge" to be administered makes this essentially Deistic philosophy quite plain:

"A Mason is obliged, by his tenure, to obey the moral law; and if he rightly understands the art, he will never be a stupid Atheist, nor an irreligious Libertine. But though in ancient times Masons were charged in every country to be of the religion of that country or nation, ... yet it is now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their

<sup>2</sup> All quotations of Masonic "charges" and verse, unless otherwise stated, are taken from The Freemasons Pocket Companion (Glasgow: R. and T. Duncan, 1771). Op. cit., p. 94.

particular opinions to themselves; that is, to be good men and true, or men of honour and honesty, by whatever denominations or persuasions they may be distinguished; ... " <sup>3</sup>

It was the declared policy of a Lodge to reward merit by advancement. To Burns, whose worth was recognized by his appointment as Depute-Master, this must have seemed very different from his experience in Mauchline society where, in his early letters and his first Common-place Book, he repeatedly despairs of ever making his way in the world. In the village, his poetic talent had the effect of isolating him. It marked him as one who was a threat to authority. In the theocracy of Mauchline, his skill would always go unrecognized. Freemasonry removed, temporarily, this source of frustration, described keenly in his "Epistle to Davie, ... " (K51):

"It's hardly in a body's pow'r,  
To keep, at times, frae being sour,  
To see how things are shar'd;  
How best o' chiels are whyles in want,  
While Coofs on countless thousands rant,  
And ken na how to wair't: (ll. 15-20)

The Lodge offered to an increasingly harassed Burns a sympathetic refuge. Its conviviality appealed to his clubbable spirit and its practical, though exclusive, benevolence demonstrated that his convictions about society were no mere fancy. There, Burns could enjoy the sensation of belonging to a group of men who, though drawn from different social levels, were all linked by a common commitment to the ideals and secrets of Freemasonry. Mauchline, its elders and its solid citizens might banish Burns, but he could draw sustenance and a sense of superiority from his membership of the Lodge. As the realization in miniature of Burns's alternative society, Freemasonry seemed to Burns to validate ideals concerning the dignity of man and his capacity for social organization. The as-

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 96 and pp. 89-90.



pirations of the verse-epistles seemed feasible there. As Twickenham was for Pope a last refuge amidst the philistine onslaught, Freemasonry, for Burns in Mauchline, was both a haven and a research-centre. In that atmosphere, his personality could expand and he could see his ideals taking practical form in the small and deliberately exclusive compass of the Lodge.

I wish to note another influence of Freemasonry which is less a matter for conjecture and more amenable to proof. Namely, the way in which the expression of Masonic ideals in songs and catches can be paralleled in Burns's verse-epistles. I would suggest that the ideas of charity and fraternity, and their expression, in Burns's first and second epistles to Lapraik, for example, owe much to Masonic song. The disciples to whom Burns appeals in these lines from his first epistle (K57):

"But ye whom social pleasure charms,  
Whose hearts the tide of kindness warms,  
Who hold your being on the terms,  
                                  'Each aid the Others',  
Come to my bowl, come to my arms,  
                                  My friends, my brothers!       (11. 121-126)

are the same men who would join together in singing this Masonic song:

"We meet like true friends on the level,  
And lovingly part on the square;  
Alike we respect king and beggar,  
Provided they're just and sincere.  
We scorn an ungenerous action,  
None can with Freemasons compare;  
We love for to live within compass,<sup>4</sup>  
By rules that are honest and fair.

There is more to the Masonic influence, however, than such a paralleling of ideas. The exclusive nature of Masonic society ensures that their verse deals often in contrasts and oppositions. Masons, as the chosen few, are contrasted with the rest of benighted humanity, or compared with specific sections of it, as in the follow-

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

ing lines from, firstly, "The Fellow-Craft's Song" and, secondly, an all-purpose song of praise for Masonry:<sup>5</sup>

As men from brutes distinguish'd are,  
A Mason other men excels;  
For what's in knowledge choice and rare,  
But in his breast securely dwells.

The glory of kings  
Are poor empty things,  
Tho' empires they have in possession,  
If void of the fame  
Of that noble name,  
Of a free and an accepted Mason.

We can trace the effect of this in Burns's tendency, in his epistolary verse, to join with his correspondent in an alliance against "the city gent", the "warly race", or "the paughty, feudal Thane". This was so ingrained as to be a habit of mind, and it can be partly explained by his situation within the village, but also by his acquaintance with Masonic song where there is a similar readiness to view the world as a hostile conspiracy. In the same way, the self-perpetuating confidence of the Masons may explain Burns's certainty of conviction in his verse-epistles. He persuades his correspondents that he has the answers, and that his judgements (and, therefore, all personal judgements) have at least the same validity as those of Kirk or State. The sweeping confidence of these lines from his first epistle to Lapraik (K57):

What's a' your jargon o' your Schools,  
Your Latin names for horns an' stools;  
If honest Nature made you fools,  
What sairs your Grammars?  
Ye'd better taen up spades and shools,  
Or knappin-hammers. 11. 61-66

may well have its origins in the calm conviction of such Masonic verse as this:

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.139 and p. 143.

Whoever in masonry perfect is found,  
 And knows what belongs to its secrets profound  
 He's always respected, whether wealthy or mean,  
 And is never seen careless of matters divine;  
 His actions are bright, and his life has no stain,  
 And at last will be happy in spite of bad fame.<sup>6</sup>

The period in which Freemasonry was a formative influence on Burns's life and poetry was short, but crucial. His Masonic involvement in Tarbolton and Mauchline helped to clarify his ideas on the organization of society and the duty of charity. The friendships and acquaintances he formed there were a crucial factor in his decision to visit Edinburgh, and so change the course of his life. They provided, moreover, for his verse a receptive audience whose temper he could judge nicely. Finally, Masonic verse influenced Burns's verse-epistles. Its air of superiority and its with-me-or-against-me bias is mirrored, as we have seen, in his expression. By raising fraternity to a basic principle of existence, it offered Burns a workable precedent for his ideas on human relationships.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 185

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