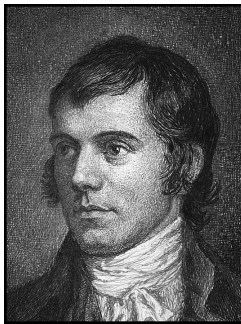


FARMER, POET, LOVER, EXCISEMAN ROBERT BURNS (1759-1796)



Eliza Fay discovers to her chagrin that her husband is devoid of both good sense and fidelity; Robert Burns, though unable to wed a woman who satisfies his intellectual as well as his emotional and physical needs, finds in marriage a happiness he does not expect.

Luckily for Burns, the son of a poor tenant farmer in Ayrshire, education is more valued and more widespread in Scotland than in England, and his father sends him to a country schoolmaster, who introduces him to English and Scots literature and teaches him French, though not the Latin drilled into the sons of gentlemen. He goes on to win a local reputation, and then national fame, for poems written in Scots, some of them directed against the reactionary party in the Presbyterian Kirk, while he creates a record of his life in letters written, and well written, in standard English.

A few of the letters sketch characters like the “flesh-disciplining godly matron” who fears Burns is but “a rough an’ roun’ Christian” and picture scenes like the drinking party at which all knelt while the poet “as priest, repeated some rhyming nonsense.” However, his principal achievement as a correspondent is to share his wide-ranging emotions, which are usually strong and often stormy. From passages often enriched by literary allusions and a wealth of metaphor and simile, we learn of his conviviality, his amorousness, his oscillating feelings about human nature, his esteem for personal honesty and independence of mind, his love of liberty, his Scottish patriotism, his fury against the bigotry of some (not all) of the clergy, and his love of poetry. Burns endures a tussle between his sceptical reason and his needy heart, and between his amorous passions and his painful guilt for impregnating a number of women.

At the age of twenty-two, the young farmer writes to his father, William Burns, “I foresee that poverty and obscurity probably await me,” and he thanks that devout man for his “lessons of virtue and piety.” The

turning point in his life comes in 1786, when, in despair at losing Jean Armour, a girl of Mauchline in Ayrshire, he accepts a post as overseer on a Jamaican estate. Before leaving, he decides that he will have his verse published in the provincial town of Kilmarnoch. Surprised by the applause his *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* receives, he rides to Edinburgh on a borrowed pony and is acclaimed as a wonder, a supposed “Heaven-taught ploughman” as the man of letters Henry Mackenzie dubs him. In the capital, he enjoys a lavish social life and mixes with aristocrats and intellectuals, but writes to the physician and author John Moore, “I know very well the novelty of my character has by far the greatest share in the learned and polite notice I have lately had.”

Burns has a lively awareness that fame is no guarantee of a livelihood, and while he has the opportunity of a post in the Excise, he speaks of agriculture as “the only thing of which I know anything,” and after much hesitation, he leases a farm in a picturesque area near Dumfries from one of his admirers, Patrick Miller. In 1787, before occupying it, he goes on expeditions in both the Highlands and the Lowlands and ventures into the north of England. His love of his country appears in his letters. From Stirling, he writes to an Ayrshire friend:

This morning I knelt at the tomb of Sir John the Graham, the gallant friend of the immortal Wallace; and two hours ago I said a fervent prayer for old Caledonia over the hole in a blue whinstone, where Robert de Bruce fixed his royal standard on the banks of Bannockburn; and just now, from Stirling Castle, I have seen by the setting sun the glorious prospect of the windings of Forth through the rich carse of Stirling, and skirting the equally rich carse of Falkirk.

Unfortunately, Robert Burns uses much of the earnings from his book to prop up his brother Gilbert, who is still farming in Ayrshire, leaving himself with insufficient funds to stock his own ground. For this reason, among others, his farm fails. He has prudently taken the precaution of studying to qualify as an Excise officer: “I thought,” he explains, referring to the modest salary, “five-and-thirty pounds a-year was no bad *dernier resort* for a poor poet, if Fortune in her jade tricks should kick him down from the little eminence to which she has lately helped him up.”

In September 1789, Burns begins to work as a revenue officer on a part-time basis. In this incongruous role, the poet can display both compassion and severity. He writes of “rascally creatures” who are “nearly ruined, as all smugglers deserve, by fines and forfeitures,” but on another occasion he observes, “I recorded every defaulter, but at the court I myself begged

off every poor body that was unable to pay." He can also "wish and pray that the goddess of justice herself would appear tomorrow among our hon. gentlemen, merely to give them a word in their ear that mercy to the thief is injustice to the honest man." The diligence he brings to his office is evident in suggestions he makes for the improvement of the service. Thus, he has a loophole closed by which liquor imported into his division is exempt from duty diminishing the revenue and facing local brewers with unfair competition. In 1791, as a full-time Excise officer, he is able to surrender the lease on his farm and move to Dumfries, where his cultural life extends to enjoyment of professional theatre.

While Burns is still living in Edinburgh, he is charmed to meet refined and educated ladies, especially Mrs. Agnes M'Lehose, who is separated from her husband and whom he poetically nicknames Clarinda. In February 1788, after visiting Jean Armour the master mason's daughter of Mauchline who is about to bear his twins, he writes to this lady:

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

But Jean, pregnant by Burns for the second time, is cast out by her family, and by the end of April a letter to his old Ayrshire friend James Smith jovially discloses his marriage to this "clean-limbed, handsome, bewitching young hussy of your acquaintance." From now on, he refers to her as Mrs. Burns.

In several letters, he alludes to Jean Armour's plight, his own conduct in rising to the occasion, and his unanticipated reward:

I had a long and much-loved fellow-creature's happiness or misery in my determination, and I durst not trifle with so important a deposit. Nor have I any cause to repent it. If I have not got polite tattle, modish manners, and fashionable dress, I am not sickened and disgusted with the multiform curse of boarding-school affectation; and I have got the handsomest figure, the sweetest temper, the soundest constitution, and the kindest heart in the county.

Although she reads only the Bible, her husband's poems, and Scottish ballads, she is an excellent singer. Guilt-stricken, as he well might be, by the illicit pregnancies he is responsible for, Burns finds to his relief that he seems to have left fornication behind, and he hopes that "the little poetic licences of former days will of course fall under the oblivious influence of some good-natured statute of celestial prescription." Tragically, he has at least one lapse when Jean is away from home, and his victim, a barmaid at a local inn, dies in childbirth. The incident does not figure in the extant correspondence, but from other sources, it is known that Jean was so forgiving and compassionate as to raise the newborn girl with her own children. She is said to have once exclaimed, "Robert needs two wives."

While Burns remains devoted to his plebeian spouse, he continues to be emotionally excited by ladies who are out of reach. To his upper class friend Mrs. Dunlop, he defends "the sacred purity" of his attachment to her neighbour Miss Lesley Baillie, even as he exclaims, "do you not know that I am almost in love with an acquaintance of yours? – Almost! said I – I am in love, souse! over head and ears, deep as the most unfathomable abyss of the boundless ocean." Sending his poem "Craigieburn Wood" to the anthologist George Thompson, he confesses: "The lady on whom it was made [Miss Jean Lorimer] is one of the finest women in Scotland; and, in fact (*entre nous*), is in a manner to me what Sterne's Eliza was to him – a mistress, a friend, or what you will, in the guileless simplicity of Platonic love."

After Burns withdraws from Edinburgh in 1788, he complains to one of the friends he has left behind:

I am here on my farm, busy with my harvest; but for all that most pleasurable part of life called SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, I am here at the very elbow of existence. The only things that are to be found in this country, in any degree of perfection, are stupidity and canting.

Before leaving the capital, he expresses his fear of loneliness to John Moore: "I have formed many intimacies and friendships here, but I am afraid they are all of too tender a construction to bear carriage a hundred and fifty miles." In the event, the prophecy proves unduly pessimistic as he remains in permanent contact with several of his new companions, mostly fellow members of the Crochallan Fencibles, a drinking club whose members share Burns's pleasure in bawdy. In May 1789, he writes to one of these recent companions, the lawyer John Cunningham:

Cruikshank [correctly, Cleghorn] is a glorious production of the author of man. You, he, and the noble Colonel of the Crochallan

Fencibles are to me
 Dear as the ruddy drops which warm my heart.

Robert Cleghorn is a farmer, and the “Colonel,” William Dunbar, is another lawyer. The printer William Smellie—“old sinful Smellie”—and Robert Cleghorn, to both of whom he sends unpublishable poems, correspond with him for years, as does the Edinburgh bookseller Peter Hill, whose customer he is. Sadly, most of his letters to Smellie have been destroyed, but the pages on which he pours out his thoughts and feelings to Hill and Cunningham survive.

Burns is capable of hostility as well as friendship, but he can quarrel without being irreconcilable. Finding it difficult to extract money he is owed from his Edinburgh publisher John Creech, he describes the latter to Mrs. M’Lehose as “that arch-rascal” and speaks of “forming ideal schemes of vengeance” against him, namely withholding his new productions from the publisher’s third edition of his poems. A few months after this resolution, he is offering Creech his new work together with a careful revision of the old.

Less deserving of Burns’s resentment is the well intentioned landlord of his farm, Patrick Miller, whose kindness, he at one point asserts, “has been just such another as Creech’s was,” but about eighteen months later he presents Miller with his new edition as a mark of gratitude, and being no longer his dependent, feels free to praise him as a man distinguished for “benevolence of heart” and “a patriot who, in a venal, sliding age, stands forth the champion of the liberties of my country.”

Far more serious are Burns’s quarrels with Mrs. M’Lehose and the Riddells and his estrangement from Mrs. Dunlop. Infatuated with Mrs. M’Lehose, a lady who seems to be smitten with him, he fends off her accusation that he is making immoral addresses to a married woman, but in a series of gushing letters expresses his ardour: “O what a fool I am in love!” he exclaims, “What an extraordinary prodigal of affection! Why are your sex called the tender sex, when I have never met with one who can repay me in passion?” After offending her, he pleads, “If in the moment of tender endearment I perhaps trespassed against the letter of decorum’s law I appeal even to you whether I ever sinned in the very least degree against the spirit of her strictest statute.” When her spiritual adviser objects to her familiarity with the poet, he bursts out, “the half-inch soul of an unfeeling, cold-blooded, pitiful presbyterian bigot, cannot forgive anything above his dungeon bosom and foggy head.” The real crisis comes when, after his unfortunate claims of everlasting fidelity, he abruptly marries Jean Armour. Answering her charge that he is a villain, he protests that, “at the time alluded to, I was not under the smallest moral tie to Mrs. Burns; nor did I, nor

could I, then know all the powerful circumstances that omnipotent necessity was busy laying in wait for me." Moreover, he boasts of "preserving untainted honour" with her "in situations where the austerest virtue would have forgiven a fall." Five years later their correspondence resumes, and even then Burns calls on her to avoid "cold language" in favour of "such sentiments" as she knows will delight him.

Burns's rupture with Robert Liddell and his sister-in-law Maria Riddell is of a different nature. Riddell is a politically liberal country landowner with an interest in Scottish folk song who likes to have Burns among his guests. He and the poet run a lending library, for which Peter Hill supplies the books. Maria, the wife of Robert Liddell's brother Walter, is a travel writer and composer of verse with whom Burns establishes a close friendship while her husband is temporarily absent in the West Indies. One day in December 1793, at a dinner given by Robert Liddell, Burns and other male guests, under the influence of alcohol, become so rambunctious – they are reported to have acted out the rape of the Sabines too realistically – that the host breaks off his friendship with the poet, and his sister-in-law follows suit. Burns's remorseful letter of apology to Robert's wife, which includes the claim "Your husband, who insisted on my drinking more than I chose, has no right to blame me" – is not accepted. When Burns next meets Maria, her reception of him is such that he can write, "'Tis true, madam, I saw you once since I was at Woodley; and that once froze the very life-blood of my heart." Four months later, unreconciled with Burns, Robert Riddell dies, and the stricken poet composes what he calls "a small but heart-felt tribute to the memory of the *man I loved*." When Maria, with whom in the past he has been on such familiar terms that he can tease her for her caprice, refuses to pardon him, he abuses her to Mrs. M'Lehose, accusing her of "some scandalous conduct" to himself and other men and tells how he has pinned to her carriage the lines

If you rattle along like your mistress's tongue,
Your speed will outrival the dart;
But, a fly for your load you'll break down on the road,
If your stuff be as rotten's her heart.

About a year after the rupture, Maria relents, and Burns is soon critiquing her verses, telling her of his own literary labours, and advising her how to promote the career of a young male protégé.

It is fortunate the friendship with Maria Riddell is restored, for a correspondence which Burns has described as "one of the most supreme of my sublunary enjoyments" is about to come to a sudden end. From Ayrshire, from Edinburgh, from his farm, from Dumfries, he exchanges letters with

Mrs. Frances Dunlop for eight years. They discuss poetry, religion, and the vicissitudes of their lives and families and commiserate with each other over their misfortunes. Burns names one of his sons Francis Wallace, Wallace being Mrs. Dunlop's maiden name. But in January 1795, mindless of her two French émigré sons-in-law and the soldiers in her family, he belittles a denunciation of the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Going to the opposite extreme from Horace Walpole's, he charges Louis with stupidity (hardly a capital offence) and perjury and stigmatizes his Queen as a prostitute devoid of principles. To Burns's sorrow – he protests, “what sin of ignorance I have committed against so highly valued a friend I am utterly at a loss to guess” – Mrs. Dunlop breaks off relations and he hears no more from her until, in 1796, she sends him a kindly message as he is dying.

Like most liberals who sympathize with the American rebels – he sees them as re-enacting the role of those who brought about the Glorious Revolution against James II in 1688 – Burns goes on to welcome the initial uprising of the downtrodden French people in 1789. He is living, however, in a time of repressive government and soon has to defend himself against the charge of siding with the violent extremists across the English Channel. As a public employee in the Excise, he is vulnerable to political accusations that can take away the livelihood on which his family depends. At the beginning of 1793, he excoriates, in a letter to Mrs. Dunlop, “the miscreant who can deliberately plot the destruction of an honest man that never offended him; and with a grin of satisfaction see the unfortunate being, his faithful wife and prattling innocents, turned over to beggary and ruin.” A few days later, referring to events of the previous November, he writes to his patron Robert Graham, “As to France, I was her enthusiastic votary in the beginning of the business. When she came to shew her old avidity for conquest by annexing Savoy and invading the rights of Holland, I altered my sentiments.” His letter explains that the reform he supports for Britain is a return to the principles of the Glorious Revolution, now perverted, especially by “an alarming system of corruption” that “has pervaded the connection between the Executive and the House of Commons.” When the revolutionary regime threatens to invade Britain, he joins the Dumfries Volunteers and furnishes them with the defiant chant “Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat?” It includes the lines

For never but by British hands
Maun British wrangs be righted!

As a democrat, Burns expresses indignation throughout his life at the arrogance displayed by many – by no means all – of the upper class. From

his farm, he writes with disgust to Mrs. Dunlop of one aspect of Edinburgh life:

When I must skulk into a corner, lest the rattling equipage of some gaping blockhead, contemptible puppy, or detestable scoundrel should mangle me in the mire, I am tempted to exclaim – “What merits have these wretches had, or what demerits have I had, in some state of Pre-existence, that they are ushered into this state of being with the sceptre of rule and the key of riches in their puny fists; and I am kicked into the world, the sport of their folly or the victim of their pride?”

Burns repeatedly insists that he will not make his way by flattering the great, and he despises the servility of those – including Jean Armour’s father – who humbly pay court to him when he first returns from Edinburgh to Mauchline as a famous man. He may be slightly open to Dr. Johnson’s charge that egalitarians want to be on the level of their superiors but are unwilling to treat their inferiors as equals. “I have ever looked on Mankind in the lump,” he declares to Mrs. Dunlop, “to be nothing better than a foolish, headstrong, credulous, unthinking mob.” He is at his best when he refers to “a just idea of that respect that man owes to man, and has a right in his turn to exact.” He is at his worst when he claims that the wellbeing and happiness of the beloved is his first concern in an amour, but that this may not be so when its object belongs to the common mass of women, who lack the capacity for that divine love which “has powers equal to all the intellectual Modulations of the Human Soul.”

It is evident that Mrs. Dunlop is a pious woman, and Burns several times writes to her, as to others, about his own view of religion. Although he is at war with the orthodox party in the Presbyterian Kirk, he admires its more moderate and modern clergy and insists that religion is necessary to him and others, and that it is rooted in the reverential and benevolent feelings of the heart, not in the intellect. “I hate,” he insists to Mrs. M’Lehose, “the very idea of a controversial divinity; as I firmly believe that every honest upright man, of whatever sect, will be accepted of the Deity.” When William McGill, one of the Ayrshire clergymen he esteems, is charged by his colleagues with heresy, the poet announces to Mrs. Dunlop his intention of deploying his satirical powers against “those ghostly beasts of prey who foul the hallowed ground of Religion with their nocturnal prowlings.” It is characteristic of the struggle between his religious feelings – strengthened by the “elevation of soul” the seasonal phenomena of nature bring him – and the sceptical thoughts his reason induces that he wavers on whether there is an afterlife. On 6 September 1789, he admits to Mrs. Dunlop that

he has been shocked by the thought of his own past temerity in doubting its reality, but on 13 December following, he confesses to the same lady: “If there is another life, it must be only for the just, the benevolent, the amiable and the humane; what a flattering idea, then, is a world to come! Would to God I as firmly believed it, as I ardently wish it.”

In spite of his vices – excessive drinking (for which he is apt to blame the “savage hospitality” to which he is subject), occasional vindictiveness, and philandering – Burns prides himself on his honesty and independence. He rejects the orthodox clergy’s Calvinist belief in the thoroughgoing corruption of human nature and holds that the benevolence nearly all are born with is ground down by hard experience:

Mankind are by nature benevolent creatures, except in a few scoundrelly instances. I do not think that avarice of the good things we chance to have, is born with us; but we are placed here amid so much nakedness, and hunger, and poverty, and want, that we are under a cursed necessity of studying selfishness, in order that we may exist!

Burns’s letters sometimes show his own benevolence in action. He urgently solicits help for James Clarke, a schoolmaster he believes has been quite unjustly accused of excessive severity and lends him money. When the remuneration of a labourer is in question, he insists that he cannot see a poor man suffer at his hand. The callous and illegal shooting of a hare out of season excites his indignation and compassion. Pity as well as guilt plays some part in the urgency with which he begs his friend Robert Ainslie to take immediate help to a servant girl who is carrying his child and may be starving.

Although he believes that religion springs from the heart, Burns brings reason to bear in his criticism of Presbyterian orthodoxy. He especially deplores the teaching that only faith contributes to the individual’s salvation since human depravity makes it impossible to earn it by the merits of one’s life. With delicious irony, he writes to his Mauchline friend the lawyer Gavin Hamilton:

Above all things, as I understand you are in the habits of intimacy with that Boanerges of gospel powers, Father Auld, be earnest with him that he will wrestle in prayer for you, that you may see the vanity of vanities in trusting to, or even practising, the carnal moral works of charity, humanity, generosity, and forgiveness.

Here Burns is unfair, at least to the official theology of the Kirk, according to which a virtuous life is one necessary sign that a person possesses the faith that saves.

In the course of his struggle against the adversities of life that, he holds, weigh down inborn goodness, Burns is animated by his two most enduring passions—for his family and for poetry. His own taste in literature is formed early and is characteristic of the period into which he is born. As the eighteenth century advances, there is a shift away from stress on rationality and adherence to the neoclassical rules deduced by Renaissance scholars from works by Aristotle and Horace. Instead, there is a focus on introspection, the benevolent element in human nature, primitive societies, the supernatural, and powerful emotions such as the awe evoked by sublime scenery and noble works of art. When Mrs. Dunlop sends Dryden's translation of Virgil's works to Burns, he is delighted by the former's poem on agriculture, the *Georgics*, but finds in the *Aeneid* the dullness of "Faultless correctness" and sees its author as all too often "a servile copier of Homer." Alongside the English neo-classical masters Pope and Addison, he likes to cite such exhibitors of the new trends as Edward Young, Thomas Gray, William Collins, Laurence Sterne, and William Cowper, as well as his countrymen James Thomson, Henry Mackenzie, and James Beattie. Pleasingly, he acclaims Cowper's blank verse masterpiece *The Task* as "a glorious poem" and even finds its religion, "bating a few scraps of Calvinistic divinity," to be "the religion of God and Nature—the religion that exalts, that ennobles man." His respect for his immediate precursors in the composition of Scots poems, Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, approaches adoration.

A major strand of Burns's correspondence concerns his aspirations and practice as a poet and as a preserver of the heritage of Scottish song. In letters written over fourteen years, he records his feelings as he matures from an amateur versifier into the successor of Ramsay and Fergusson and a national figure who is welcome at the tables of landowners and noblemen.

In his early days in Edinburgh, Burns is sure his new fame exceeds what his talent deserves. While still farming, he writes to his early admirer John Moore:

The character and employment of a poet were formerly my pleasure, but are now my pride.... I have not a doubt but the knack, the aptitude, to learn the Muses' trade, is a gift bestowed by Him "who forms the secret bias of the soul"; but I as firmly believe that *excellence* in the profession is the fruit of industry, labour, attention, and pains ... poesy I am determined to prosecute with all my vigour.

Ten months later, he declares to the sister of his loyal patron the Earl of Glencairn, "to be a poet is my highest Ambition, my dearest Wish, and my unwearied study."

In 1787, Burns meets the engraver James Johnson in Edinburgh and rejoices to become a contributor to his *Scots Musical Museum*, for which he begins to collect, revise, and compose poems. Later he adds to his labours by fitting lyrics, his own and others', to music for *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs*, which is being compiled by George Thomson, a government clerk, who proves a more argumentative editor than Johnson. In his disagreements with Thomson, Burns asserts, "Of the poetry I speak with confidence; but the music is a business where I hint my ideas with the utmost diffidence." He warns Thomson that the demands of the tune will not allow all the lyrics to be first class poetry: "There is a peculiar rhythmus in many of our airs, and a necessity of adapting syllables to the emphasis, or what I would call the *feature-notes* of the tune, that cramp the poet, and lay him under almost insuperable difficulties." Motivated by a zealous patriotism, Burns feels that to accept payment for his contributions to the two anthologies would be "downright *sodomy of soul*." His love of his country is rooted in a childhood devotion to the memory of the national hero William Wallace, whose story, he says, "poured a Scottish prejudice into my veins which will boil along there, till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest."

Burns is very anxious that, in his words, "our national music preserve its native features." He delightedly claims: "There is a *naïveté*, a pastoral simplicity, in a slight intermixture of Scots words and phraseology, which is more in unison ... with the simple pathos or rustic sprightliness of our native music, than any English verses whatever." Thomson, he complains, is too inclined to sacrifice simplicity.

One charming passage describes Burns's manner of composing verses to fit a tune:

My way is: I consider the poetic sentiment correspondent to my idea of the musical expression, then choose my theme, begin one stanza; when that is composed, which is generally the most difficult part of the business, I walk out, sit down now and then, look out for objects in nature around me that are in unison or harmony with the cogitations of my fancy, and workings of my bosom; humming every now and then the air, with the verses I have framed. When I feel my muse beginning to jade, I retire to the solitary fireside of my study, and there commit my effusions to paper; swinging at intervals on the hind legs of my elbow chair, by way of calling forth my own critical strictures, as my pen goes on.

How closely Burns works over his verse is evident from his caution that “by the time one has finished a piece, it has been so often viewed and reviewed before the mental eye, that one loses in a good measure the powers of critical discrimination.” He is anxious that inferior verse should not appear under his name and early laments to Mrs. Dunlop that “my success has encouraged such a shoal of ill-spawned monsters to crawl into public notice under the title of Scots Poets that the very term, Scots Poetry, borders on the burlesque.”

Burns’s many letters to James Johnson and George Thomson contrast pleasantly with letters that tell of his periods of depression, his illnesses and accidents, his quarrels and debts, his grief at the death of his only legitimate daughter, and his fear that he himself will perish and leave his wife and sons penniless. He does die early, in July 1796, at the age of thirty-seven, not knowing that his admirers will raise a subscription to support his family.

Robert Burns recognizes that he is a man driven by his emotions. He writes to Margaret Chalmers, one of the cultured ladies whose friendship he cherishes:

I lie so miserably open to the inroads and incursions of a mischievous, light-armed, well-mounted banditti, under the banners of imagination, whim, caprice, and passion; and the heavy-armed veteran regulars of wisdom, prudence, and forethought move so very, very slow, that I am almost in a state of perpetual warfare, and, alas! frequent defeat.

Although the occasion of this confession is only a belated letter, Burns is not entirely joking when he complains to a London editor about the uncomfortableness of conscience:

Had the troublesome yelping cur powers efficient to prevent a mischief, he might be of use; but at the beginning of the business, his feeble efforts are, to the workings of passion, as the infant frosts of an autumnal morning to the unclouded fervour of the rising sun; and no sooner are the tumultuous doings of the wicked deed over, than amidst the bitter native consequences of folly in the very vortex of our horrors, up starts conscience, and harrows us with the feelings of the damned.

Yet if his emotions constitute the most powerful element in his makeup, and he can complain that “the poetic mind finds itself miserably deranged in, and unfit for the walks of business,” he is able to master the mathematics and mensuration he needs to qualify as an Excise officer and then serve

efficiently in the role. The complexity of this writer enriches his epistolary self-portrait, in which his figure stands out against the background of a divided Kirk, a repressive government, and a heroic if often tragic national history.