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The Narrator of *Tam o' Shanter*

JOHN C. WESTON

By the use of a narrator who alternately admires and condemns the hero, Burns presents in *Tam o' Shanter* a comic vision of the world torn between the pleasures of drink, camaraderie, song, dance, and sex on the one hand and Calvinistic duty, respectability, and restraint on the other. The divided character of the narrator as seen in the structure and the language of the poem also shows a mind torn between native Scots and Scots-English culture. Because Burns recognized in his letters and journals similar divisions in himself and even expressed them in phrases identical to those in the poem, *Tam o' Shanter* is a burlesque of Burns's divided self, which is in turn similar to the split in the Scottish character and analogous to some universal conflicts, such as between the body and the soul. The poem is therefore not just a comic witches' tale but expresses a thoughtful view in spite of those who deny that since the sixteenth century Scots is incapable of expressing thought.

AFTER BURNS REPUBLISHED his collection of poems in Edinburgh, he spent the remaining eight years of his life attempting to employ literary types not used or little used in his earlier pieces so as, he wrote, "to secure my old friend, Novelty, on my side, by the *kind* of my performances."¹ He tried moral epistles and satires in the manner of Pope, political ballads, serious elegies, prologues for the theater, the drama, the folk-song lyric, and the folk tale. Only the lyric and the tale have made much impression on literature, and the tale he exploited just once—but in that instance with such a masterly touch that *Tam o' Shanter* takes second place, in the minds of most subsequent critics, to no other of his poems or perhaps only to *The Jolly Beggars*. Burns himself thought it his "own favorite poem," his "standard performance" (*L*, II, 68, 69).

But the central problem of interpreting Burns's unique masterpiece has never been convincingly solved, although several recent critics have isolated and confronted it with varying degrees of awareness and fullness.² These critics have recog-

¹J. DeLancey Ferguson, ed., *The Letters of Robert Burns* (Oxford, 1931), I, 379—hereafter cited in the text as *L*.

²Particularly, Thomas Crawford, *Robert Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Stanford, 1960), pp. 220-236, and Richard Morton, "Narrative Irony in Robert Burns's *Tam o' Shanter*," *MLQ*, XXII (1961), 12-20. Karl Kroeber (*Romantic Narrative Art*, Madison, 1960) perceives

nized that the attitude toward life presented in the poem is somehow related to the two or three voices which narrate the tale or, to put it another way, to the inconsistent personality of the speaker. But the tendency has been to indicate the voices, to show how they shift and produce humor or particular effects in passages, but never to relate them as an essential structural feature to the cumulative "meaning," that is, the vision and feeling of the world received from the poem.

This essay contends that the narrator of the tale is not Burns in his own person but an exaggerated version of a good part of him—that Burns with full awareness caused the tale to be told by a caricature of himself. It may seem an over-sophistication to distinguish, in the interest of establishing a narrative point of view, between Burns himself and a character possessing exaggerated aspects of himself; but self-conscious design can best be emphasized by the concept of a created narrator, and the amusing naïvete of the speaker can only be explained by assuming Burns's detachment, however partial. It may also seem that this approach—involving as it does notions of voices, a speaker, dramatic detachment—is an example of the currently modish pursuit of *personae*, the dangers of which Professor Irvin Ehrenpreis has sharply exposed;³ but the approach here attempted avoids these dangers by concentrating on Burns's meaning and by an appeal beyond the text to relate the characters of the narrator and the poet.

This essay also offers a more speculative idea, difficult to prove but also difficult to avoid—that the narrator of the tale is divided in a very Scottish way. Many critics have noticed, as will be shown, a distinctive split in the Scottish character; but this essay is the first, I believe, to relate *Tam o' Shanter* to this split and thus to show how it is of all or almost all Burns's poems the most distinctively national.

I

Burns is still viewed in large measure from several mirrors which reflect partial and distorted images: from the senti-

the shifting perspectives of the poem as related to the later form of the Romantic narrative (pp. 4-11).

³"Personae," *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature*, Carroll Camden, ed. (Chicago, 1963), pp. 25-37.

mental and romantic mirror, the uneducated peasant with a spark of heaven's fire; from the Victorian mirror, the moral profligate; and from the perennial popular mirror, the boon companion and ideal common man. The first impulse, therefore, would be to identify Burns with Tam, who gratifies all these erroneous views. The identification would be more justified for a character in a poem written six years before this, an interesting anticipation of Tam, the I-narrator of the somewhat similar comic tale of a simple drunken man's midnight encounter with supernatural horror on his way home—*Death and Doctor Hornbook*. In *Tam o' Shanter*, however, with his customary reliance on conventional forms but his boldness in modifying them, Burns changed the traditional folk tale to the extent of substituting for the usual omniscient point of view a limited one, that of the peasant-poet narrator. And it is with this narrator, not Tam, that we must associate Burns, because Burns, like the narrator, was attracted both to the world of sociable hedonism and to the world of moral responsibility, both to Scots vernacular and to English literature. Burns projects an exaggeration of the two sides of his mind into a narrator, who is obviously ridiculed, as we shall subsequently see, by his clumsy mistakes in story telling, his inability to provide an appropriately simple style for a low tale, and the spotty and contradictory extravagance of his moral fervor. Burns himself could be ridiculed for many of these weaknesses. And that is exactly what Burns intended. By exaggerating the details of his own divided personality in the character of the narrator of *Tam o' Shanter*, he created a burlesque of his own contradictory mind.

Burns was aware of the contradictions in his own mind, consisting of the opposing values grouped around the two poles he exaggerated in his narrator.⁴ On one hand he saw himself as indolent, careless, foolish, impulsive; driven by imagination, whim, caprice, and passion; full of humor, wit, good nature, and generosity; fated to a life of poverty and giddy instability. These are the traits he felt distinguished the poet. On the other hand, he valued and strove for prudence, contrivance, forethought, and frugality; a life directed with order and

⁴The late DeLancey Ferguson asserts that Burns was unaware of this central antinomy but stresses its existence and importance (*Selected Letters of Robert Burns*, World Classics [1953], p. vi).

regularity by reason, common sense, and conscience, all leading to wealth and wisdom. These are the traits of the responsible head of a family. The words of these two descriptions are Burns's own in expressing his character and values in his letters and journals.⁵

A single example will perhaps suffice to demonstrate this aspect of Burns's mind. In 1788 he wrote a heated attack on careless gossiping indecency to a correspondent with whom he had generally allowed himself considerable latitude of decorum. He found himself, he said, disgusted with the silly prurience of a neighbor: "I know it has been a fault of my own too; but from this moment I abjure it as I would the service of Hell! Your poets, Spendthrifts, and other fools of that kidney pretend forsooth to crack their jokes on Prudence; but 'tis a squalid Vagabond glorying in his rags." Burns goes on to excuse imprudence in matters of money but not of "character." But with hard-headed clarity he attests that financial recklessness is not necessarily a sign of a goodness, heart: he has as "often met with the same disingenuous, the same hollow-hearted insincerity, and the disintegrative depravity of principle, in the hackneyed victims of Profusion as in the unfeeling children of Parsimony" (*L*, I, 231-323).

This was written after Burns had married and committed himself to farming in Ellisland. He had written before of poets as by nature spendthrifts and fools, but always with a wistful sympathy: "The followers o' the ragged Nine—/ Poor, thoughtless devils" (*Second Epistle to J. Lapraik*, st. 16). That he contradicted himself when he wrote this letter does not show that he had changed his mind with the accession of family responsibility, because only a month later he wrote another letter including a poem attacking the sons of prudence and pitying unworldly poets (*L*, I, 241). It does show that Burns had, like many of us, a mind split by contrary attitudes to life.

⁵The conflict is apparent to anyone who reads the letters, but see Crawford's discussion (pp. 39-41) of the influence on Burns of his father's "Manual of Religious Belief"; Burns's early poems on moral and religious themes; his testimony to John Moore concerning "the will-o'-wisp meteors of thoughtless Whim" and the "early ingrained Piety and Virtue" as his two alternating principles of action (*L*, I, 109). See also *L*, I, 139, 145-146, 152, 229 and the journal entry bidding farewell to "gilded follies" (*Works*, ed. W. S. Douglas [Edinburgh, 1879], VI, 396-397).

Most convincing of all for the purpose of showing the relation between Burns's conflict and that in *Tam o' Shanter* are three of his expressions of it in which he uses the very language and situation of the poem. With an obvious forecast of the state of affairs between Tam and Kate, Burns wrote in 1788: "Reason almost always comes to me, like an unlucky wife to a poor devil of a husband—just in time enough to add her reproaches to his other grievances" (*L*, I, 206). And the year before, he had expressed the very language of the narrator of *Tam o' Shanter* in describing a vision he had had of his Conscience, "a long-visag'd, dry moral-looking Phantom . . . with the frigid air of a declaiming Preacher," who harrangued Burns on the text, "I, Wisdom, dwell with Prudence" (Proverbs viii:12), in this manner: "I will not mention *how many of my salutary advices you have despised* [*italics added*].—I have given you line upon line, precept upon precept; but while I have been chalking you out the straight way to Wealth and Character, you with audacious effrontery, have zigzagged across the path, contemning me to my face" (*L*, I, 73). In diction and situation this is remarkably close to the narrator's sympathetic apostrophe to long-suffering wives:

Ah, gentle dames, it gars me greet,
To think how monie counsels sweet,
How monie lengthen'd, sage advices
The husband frae the wife despises! (33-36)⁶

He wrote later in the year (1787) of his hostility to the Wisdom and Prudence of this same Biblical verse and, again falling into language soon after to be used in the passage quoted above, ironically expressed his eagerness to spend an evening with Wisdom and Prudence, enjoying their "solemn, *lengthened faces*" and their "*sage* remarks on the good-for-nothing sons and daughters of indiscretion and folly" (*L*, I, 130, *italics added*). But his hostility to wisdom and prudence is a defensive reaction to a guilty conscience that spoke for virtues which one part of his mind could not help but admire.

⁶Line numbers are from *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, ed. J. Logie Robertson (Oxford, 1904), but the quotations are from the superior but unlineated text of *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, eds. William E. Henley and Thomas F. Henderson (Edinburgh, 1901), I, 278-287.

In these letters written a few years before the composition of *Tam o' Shanter*, we find the same conflict that we shall discover in the poem expressed in identical words and figures. When Burns thought about this conflict in himself while he composed these letters, certain expressions entered his mind. The presence of the same expressions in the poem suggest that the same conflict is there too. By demonstrating that Burns himself possessed the divided character which is comically exaggerated in the narrator of the poem, we not only prove that the personality of the narrator is a burlesque of the poet but, more important for literary criticism, we gain further support for a reading of this poem which comes from perceiving it as the ostensible product of such a fictive narrator. This circularity is valid. For if, as his best recent critics have contended, Burns commonly bodied forth in his poems not alien themes but aspects of his own mind⁷ and if his mind is divided like the person who seems to narrate the tale, and if Burns expresses this conflict elsewhere in words and figures identical to those in the poem, then biography lends support to the textual analysis in the next section of this essay.

We can now proceed to notice another similarity although a more dubious one because establishing it involves speculations about national character, an activity now in general disfavor, but about a fact few would deny. The antithesis in Burns's mind as seen in *Tam o' Shanter* is, it would seem, related to similar but not identical religious conflicts suffered by other of his countrymen, like Boswell and Hume and Byron,⁸ and by the divided personalities of characters in Scottish fiction, like Robert Colwan in James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*⁹ and, of course, in the title character of Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. These moral divisions seem to result partially from reactions to the fright-

⁷Ferguson, ed., *Selected Letters*, p. vi; Crawford says his entire book resulted from this view (p. xii); Edwin Muir's comments on the honesty and solidity of even Burns's sentimentality seem also to support it (*Essays on Literature and Language* [London, 1949], p. 59).

⁸Crawford, pp. 34-38; for Crawford's account of this conflict in other Scots, see pp. 41-44. It is remarkable that Crawford isolated Burns's and the Scottish conflict so sharply but failed to consider its implications in *Tam o' Shanter* (pp. 221-236).

⁹Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh and London, 1958), pp. 247-250.

ening teachings of the Kirk and, perhaps, particularly their antinomian tendency. But they also are probably related in some way to the more general contradictory character of the Scot well before John Knox.¹⁰ The stark contrast, for instance, in Dunbar's powerful *The Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo* between the immoral secret and the moral public lives of the "ladies" overheard in the bower suggests the contrast in Burns between indulgence and duty. Such general assertions can be made of any nation and its literature, but they seem in fact to have been made of Scotsmen with striking number and persistence. For instance, G. Gregory Smith in 1919 invented the phrase "Caledonian Antisyzygy" to characterize all the combinations of opposites in the Scot and more particularly a distinctive blend of the contrary moods of detailed realism and supernatural fantasy which he found in Scottish literature from the beginning.¹¹ Gregory Smith suggested that this antithesis of the real and the fantastic results from a penchant for fantasy as "a protest against, or better perhaps, a relief from the prosaic orderliness of real life" (p. 53). The relation of this formulation with the narrator's qualified loyalty to Tam's fantasy world in the tavern as a protest to Kate's prosaic decorum is obvious. In our own time, the great Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid used Smith's idea and even some of his phrases in his finest and longest Scots poem, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), and since then has pursued the idea with a fascination which has resulted in several poems and a whole book. And MacDiarmid's interest has caused many critics of Scottish literature to apply the idea extensively.¹²

II

It now remains to show by an analysis of the poem, how these divisions work in the personality of the narrator of the tale. Most obviously the narrator presents himself as essentially the same kind of person as Tam. He clearly associates his

¹⁰The tendency of critics nowadays is to think of the Scots character as causing and not being caused by the Calvinist Kirk (e.g., Tom Scott, *Dunbar* [New York, 1966], p. 140).

¹¹*Scottish Literature, Character and Influence* (London, 1919), pp. 4-40.

¹²MacDiarmid's book is *Scottish Eccentrics* (London, 1936). Some of the critics are John W. Oliver in *A Scots Anthology*, eds. Oliver and J. C. Smith (Edinburgh and London, 1949), pp. xxxi-xxxiv; Wittig, *passim*;

and Tam's wayward habits (and his local auditors') at the beginning by the use of the embracing "we":

While we sit bousing at the nappy,
An' getting fou and unco happy,
We think na on the lang Scots miles

. . .

That lie between us and our hame. (5-9)

And his whole account of Tam's activities is generally admiring and friendly. But there is throughout an overtone of ridicule and disapproval—of Tam's happy oblivion in the tavern to the real cares of life, of his drunken carefree attitude in the face of scenes of horror amid darkness and storm on his journey home, of his lack of prudent fear at the witches' dance in Kirk-Alloway, and finally at his losing "his reason a' thegither" (188) by succumbing to the bonny witch Nannie's lusty dance and roaring out his approval. Further, there are separate passages where the narrator stands aside and explicitly admonishes Tam for moral irresponsibility, as when he recounts Kate's reiterated rehearsal of Tam's weaknesses and openly takes her and all suffering wifedom's side (17-36) and when he laments Kate's approaching widowhood to be caused by Tam's self-indulgence (201-204). The narrator, although fully conscious of the attraction and style of Tam's permissive approach to life, nevertheless in a very un-Tam-like way tends to moralize, as he does on the evanescence of pleasure and the inevitability of confronting the moment of responsible behavior (59-68), on the dangerously emboldening effects of ale and whisky (105-110), and on the fate of Nannie and the failure of her granny's hopes for her (164-178). Also the narrator's moralistic fervor leads him to botch his tale by unnecessary and contradictory remarks. He is so used to finding fault with his hero that he becomes confused and criticizes Tam for not spying on pretty witches although the narrator would certainly not in a sober mood counsel spying on any witches at all—furthermore, he admits directly, and the admission exposes the fatuous futility of his pre-

Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Short Introduction to Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh, 1951), pp. 11-12; but see Edwin Muir's attempt to refute the idea in *Scott and Scotland* (London, 1936), pp. 91-114. For a discussion of MacDiarmid's use of the Caledonian Antisyzygy, see Kenneth Buthlay, *Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh and London, 1964), pp. 44-47.

vious remark, that Tam was indeed leering at a pretty witch (151-165); he laments Tam's imminent punishment in Hell and Kate's lonely widowhood although Tam survives his adventure (201-204), and at the end he presents the grotesquely inappropriate moral that the story of the trifle of Meg's lost tail should offer adequate inducement to resist the powerful attractions of drink and illicit sex. Burns has created a dramatic character to tell the tale of Tam's night ride. This character is a man torn between Tam's values (the pleasures of camaraderie, drink, sex, song, and dance) and Kate's values (respectability, responsibility, moral truths, and Calvinistic rigor).

The narrator's mental conflict has another dimension: he is attracted on one hand to the cultural values of Tam's world of the Scots peasantry with its old Scots songs (84), local horror tales (89-96), Scots dance (115-117), and bag-pipe music (123) and on the other to the more cultivated values and tastes of English and Scots-English literature. This second aspect of his divided personality is displayed in his tendency to over-write. He uses in his narrative of Tam's adventures some of the conventions of the epic: the epithet "heroic Tam" (129), the prophecy of the catastrophe (29-32), the history of the sark (171-178), the reference to the inadequacy of the bardic Muse (179-180), the excessive piling on of three epic similes describing the chase (193-199). In general his manner is too elevated for his subject: the tone of all the moral asides, each in the form of an apostrophe (to Tam, to John Barleycorn, to abused wives); the personification of "Care" in the couplet describing Tam's drunken happiness in the tavern (53-54); the lofty images in the four similes of transient pleasure (59-66), accumulated in insistent parallel structure to the point of parody; the sententious and righteous air of the concluding moral.¹³ Burns uses the manner of his narrator, a crony of Tam's who has pretensions to the style of fashionable literature, to make a new kind of mock heroic poem wherein the distinctive ironic discrepancy between the manner and the subject is apparently

¹³Many of the parodistic elements are identified but their collective function not explained in an article by Allan H. MacLaine in *Criticism*, I (1959), 308-316; the same can be said of the mock heroic elements discussed by M. L. Mackenzie in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, I (1963), 87-92.

created, not directly by the conscious poet (as in *The Rape of the Lock*) nor by a conscious and sophisticated fictive narrator (as in *The Nuns' Priest's Tale*) but by a naïve fictive narrator whose tale because of his contradictory values becomes, unwitting to himself (but not to Burns), a burlesque.

Other aspects of the narrator's character emerge. He is a proud resident of Ayr who knows all the gossip and local legend. His two parenthetical ejaculations of approval—"Auld Ayr, wham ne'er a town surpasses,/For honest men and bonie lasses" (15-16) and "Weel mounted on his gray mare Meg, / A better never lifted leg" (79-80)—show an elbow-nudging provincial complaisance. When he reproaches Tam for supposedly spying on *old* witches (151-162), he reveals his own eagerness for illicit sexual encounter; and in indicating the high value he places on such experience —

Thir breeks o' mine, my only pair,
That ance were plush, o' guid blue hair,
I wad hae gi'en them off my hurdies
For ae blink o' the bonie burdies!

— he reveals not only that his thoughts of sexuality spontaneously produce thoughts of divestiture but that he is so poor that his single pair of trousers, now worn smooth, he considers a prized possession. And his reference to his Muse (179-180) makes clear, what is implied by his manner throughout, that he is the local bard. All of the traits lead us to conclude that the narrator has a distinctive character, that this character although similar is not identical with Burns himself, and that the character determines the structure, the manner, and the meaning of the poem.

If we believe that this tale is told by a fictive narrator, a local peasant bard torn by the conflicting values of sensual and social indulgence against moral responsibility and of Scots folk culture against English literary conventions and sensibility, then we have no difficulty explaining the eight lines beginning with the poppy simile on the evanescence of pleasure (59-66) which trouble critics because of their apparent discrepancy of tone and language. The passage is in English or, as two critics seem correct in believing, in Scots-English.¹⁴ Most commentators explain the English manner

¹⁴Wittig, p. 201; Crawford, p. 227n.

and diction of these lines as suggesting burlesque or Burns in a moral mood for the expression of which he found the use of English or Scots-English more congenial than Scots.¹⁵ But these are partial solutions. The whole truth is that Burns causes the local peasant bard who tells the tale to relent to the attraction that draws part of his sensibility to the English ways of the Edinburgh literati, and as a consequence to fall into an English manner and such a Scots-English language as he is accustomed to hear from the pulpit in the kirk on similar matters of high morality.¹⁶ The entire poem is more a mixture of separate brief passages of Scots and Scots-English than has been noted and than is found in Burns's other poems. And this mixture of language in brief contrasting passages throughout—not in a few lengthy and discrete passages of all Scots and all English as in several of Burns's less successful poems, such as *The Vision* and *The Cotter's Saturday Night*—shows once more how the divided personality of the narrator informs this whole poem and determines its structure. The contradictory voices in the poem do not result from Burns's speaking directly now in one pose, now in another; they all are parts of a single voice of one inconsistent and divided man, the teller of the tale the affable friend of Tam and whisky and pretty witches and folk song and broad Scots—but also the champion of Kate, of duty, of noble moral truth, and of English literature.

III

Accepting, first, the widely-held view of Burns as torn between both Calvinism and hedonism and between the Scottish and the English literary traditions and, second, accepting more tentatively an also widely-observed related division in the Scottish character, we have by a new interpretation of the poem and by dictional and situational similarities between autobiographical passages in Burns's writings and *Tam o'*

¹⁵William Montgomerie, "Tam o' Shanter," *New Judgments: Robert Burns*, ed. W. Montgomerie (Glasgow, 1957), p. 83; G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature*, p. 148.

¹⁶James Beattie, *On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition* (1773): "A sermon in Broad Scotch would now seem ridiculous to a Scotch peasant, and would be less intelligible than one of Swift's or Atterbury's" (quoted in Matthew McDairmid, ed., *Poems of Robert Fergusson*, [S.T.S., 1954], I, 130n).

Shanter, related the poem to its creator and its nation as a mock heroic of the schism in each. How does this interpretation of the poem account for its wide appeal? The answer is that, like all great art, the appeal of this poem is outward from the particular to the general, from the local to the universal. The poet must work through the details and the attitudes of his own person, time, and place to touch the springs of the future and the distant. By an unconscious process of analogy, we sense the similarity of the historical vision of the poem to more abiding or universal visions or to contemporary visions. Thus if *Tam o' Shanter* presents a vision of a world torn between Scots pleasure and Scots Calvinism, we sense the similarity to those shifting dichotomies in all our lives, reflected variously in the medieval debates between the body and the soul, the antithetical parts of the individual called by George Orwell the official self and the unofficial self, as seen in Don Quixote and Sancho Panza and all their analogues and derivatives,¹⁷ the contrasts between curiosity and legal behavior of Arnold's *Hebraism and Hellenism*, and even the romantic man and the practical woman in James Thurber's battle of the sexes.

One conclusion of this interpretation is that *Tam o' Shanter* is not satiric. If satire is an attack, no matter how gentle, on a particular historical item employing some artistic device of indirection, we cannot suggest, with a number of recent critics, that this poem attacks Calvinistic suppression of art and pleasure, as associated with a superstitious belief in the devil and his witches crew in the ruins of Kirk-Alloway.¹⁸ Calvinism is not an object of attack because the religious deviant, Tam, is also ridiculed. Rather, the narrator's entire contradictory attitude to life, subsuming almost all aspects of Scotland in Burns's day,¹⁹ is the object held up for laughter, but this object is so general that the effect is more comic than satiric.

Another conclusion, already implicit in what has been observed, is that all the voices in the poem, no matter how contradictory, are quite sincerely parts of Burns's belief. Christina Keith was not as wrong as Thomas Crawford

¹⁷"The Art of Donald McGill," *A Collection of Essays* (Doubleday Anchor Book, A29, 1954), pp. 120-122.

¹⁸Montgomerie, p. 78; Crawford, p. 227.

¹⁹Crawford calls it, with one exception, "the most genuinely *national* of all his poems" (p. 222); the present essay shows why.

thought she was in believing that Burns himself is heard in the formal moral at the end.²⁰ Calvinism did not, as Miss Keith asserts, "have the last word" in the poem, but it has a very considerable word indeed. The speaker of the justly lamented Stanza X of *The Cotter's Saturday Night* execrating the studied seducer of female innocence, in spite of his sentimental piety, is also quite sincerely a part of Burns.

Finally, if this poem does present in rich detail a complex and contradictory view of life, of a man caught between desire and duty, a view connecting a central Scottish experience with important international themes, then we should question the idea that Scots since the Reformation is incapable of uniting genuine feeling and serious thought. The idea, forcefully expressed but not invented by the late Edwin Muir in 1936 and treated variously by others since,²¹ is roughly that Calvinism, Knox's use of English, and the move of the court of James VI to London cut short the declining glories of the medieval Golden Age of Scottish literature; and when literary Scots was revived in the eighteenth century it copied inferior colloquial and rustic models which had survived the seventeenth-century turbulence in the underground, and that Burns, also copying these inferior models and thus deprived of a medium to express serious thought, put the stamp of his genius so firmly on the degraded and partial tradition and the dying language that the whole of the nineteenth century right down to MacDiarmid's "Scottish Renaissance Movement" of the late 'twenties imitated Burns with servile mediocrity. Thus, the cry urged on his followers by MacDiarmid, "Not Burns—Dunbar!" But if the position of this essay is found to be correct, we must believe that Burns does express serious thought through a comic medium, at least in this

²⁰Crawford, p. 234, quoting Keith, *The Russet Coat* (London, 1956), p. 103.

²¹*Scott and Scotland*, pp. 17-118 *et passim*. David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People* (London, 1961), pp. 72-110. Mr. Craig sees the limitation of an exclusive "downrightness" (country wit) in vernacular literature as caused less by Calvinist repression of art than by the Kirk's encouraging an existing national tendency (p. 77). David Daiches makes the quite defensible statement: "How to use the vernacular as a language in serious literature (that is, in literature that was more than an antiquarian exercise, a jest, or a *tour de force*) was the problem faced by Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns, and it was never permanently solved" ("Eighteenth-Century Vernacular Poetry," *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, ed. James Kinsley [London, 1955], p. 151).

poem; that Muir is wrong in placing it in a class of "wild, irresponsible fantasy unguided by intellect"²²; and that Mr. David Craig, driving too hard at his thesis about the limitation of the Scots language, fails to distinguish subject and theme when he says of *Tam o' Shanter*, "Burns is only going as deep as his materials [the witch tale] allow."²³ The witch tale when told by Burns's ambivalent narrator goes very deep indeed, not by the lyric outcry of many of Burns's songs, instantly touching primitive feeling, but by a complicated and rich collection of detail, a sustained pattern of contrasting tonality, and an intricate structure. In *Tam o' Shanter* Burns used the very conflict of language and culture which has been justly said to have often limited his expression to extend its range.

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²²*Scott and Scotland*, p. 65.

²³*Scottish Literature*, p. 109.