**Semester 4: ENGH: Paper HCC –T-9: Robert Burns: A Bard’s Epitaph**

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**Occasion of the poem**: The poem was composed in 1786, the year when Burns moved to Edinburgh after the literary circle there expressed interest in him following the publication of “Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect” the same year. His first act in Edinburgh was to visit the grave of Robert Fergusson (1750-74) who died in a madhouse at the age of twenty-four. He was the Scottish bard Burns had idolized, charmed by the delicate descriptions of nature in his odes. Burns however could not find the grave; the poor poet had been huddled into Scottish earth as a pauper. The poem suggests that Burns found in that unidentified grave an omen of his own ill-future. Deeming Fergusson as his prototypical self, Burns broods on his fate and produces an epitaph that combines elegy, obituary and dark introspection. Resemblances between the temperaments and poetic careers of Fergusson and himself prompt for Burns autobiographical contemplation – and leads him to sing his own elegy while singing Fergusson’s, like Milton did in “Lycidas” with Edward King.

**Structure of the poem**: The poem is written in five stanzas of six lines each, of which the fourth and sixth lines are shorter than others, and used for direct statement/imperative. This is made clear in the rhyming pattern – aaabab – reserving lines 4 and 6 for a purpose other than lines 1,2,3, and 5. The first three lines in each stanza put up the figure of a man (fool/bard/man) as a supposition (the first lines in the first three stanzas begin “Is there” – if there is) and the last three lines bids this supposed figure to ponder and mourn. This pattern of the suppository and descriptive followed by the arresting and imperative is used in all stanzas. The pattern is reflected in the metrical design of the stanzas – lines 1,2,3 and 5 are in iambic tetrameter, and lines 4 and 6 are in iambic dimeter. In the second stanza, lines 4 and 6 have one spondee and one iambic foot, suggesting the arresting mood. In the last stanza, when the reader is emphatically addressed and the whole stanza is a sober understanding of human nature, line 1 alters the established rhythm with alternating trochaic and iambic feet, and line 5, loaded with grave self-realization, breaks into spondee, iamb and anapaest one after another.

**Words from Scottish/northern English dialect**:

Owre – over blate – blunt snool – submit, bow down dool – dole, song of sorrow

Drap – drop, a small globule of liquid

**Stanza-wise prose rendering and commentary**

**Stanza 1**: *If there is anywhere a fool driven by sudden whims instead of considered thought, because he is too hasty for reasoned thinking, too haughty to be disciplined, and also too blunt to seek wisdom and too self-important to be submissive, he should come to stand before this mound of grass (really a grave) and shed tears and sing a doleful (mourning) song.*

The first three lines sketch the thoughtless, hot-blooded disposition of the poet himself, as well as the average Scotsman. Youth and the Scottish tendency for reckless living lead to this lack of sobriety and peaceful, balanced thought. When a person of such disposition comes to face this grave, it should be a sobering moment, humbling the pride and youthful ignorance before the grave fact of death. From the whim-driven, careless mood to that of mournful homage is a sea-change, calling for a leash upon the natural instincts of the ‘whim-inspired fool’. While asking from his reader this submission to something beyond his nature, the poet also undergoes himself a lesson in humility, as he sees himself and Fergusson too in the ‘fool’. The word ‘fool’ carries the sense of being spiritually blind, and therefore ignorant of the value of Fergusson’s grave. (‘grassy heap’ to the ordinary eye). While the first three lines suggest rowdy motion, the next three counterpoise it with stoppage, which can be a point of beginning of spiritual learning through insight.

**Stanza 2**: *If there is a rustic singer, hidden silently among the crowds that gather every week here, I implore him not to pass by this grave nonchalantly. Here is his brother lying under the ground – I plead him to shed a sigh of mourning for his fellow bard.*

This stanza is the most autobiographical – Burns is himself the ‘bard of rustic song’, come here ‘noteless’ (lacking poetic inspiration) to visit the grave of his vocational elder. The high-strung note of the first stanza is much subdued here, and the bard (Burns or some spiritual brother of his) is silent and ‘steals’, almost ready for obeisance from a heaving heart. This closely reflects the mental state of Burns as he came to the graveyard. On finding that the grave of the beloved poet Fergusson is in utter neglect, he feels indignant and finds it imperative to rouse ‘frater-feeling’ among his kind, in the face of contempt by society and state. If the grave of a poet like Fergusson can turn to a ‘grassy heap’ with no epitaph or decoration, what is to happen to Burns himself? The stanza hints at this existential fear – Burns probably has here an imaginative vision of his own grave, forgotten and unsung, passed over by ignorant posterity. He shudders at the vision, and the agony adds pathos to the imploration – “O, pass not by!” – the mark of exclamation is significant. It is even more poignant that there are crowds to visit the graveyard weekly (presumably on Sundays), but none care to enquire of this ‘grassy heap’. A timeless truth seems to arise from the stanza that poets ever die unsung in history, and that it is the lone task of the future poet, the bearer of the tradition, to search for his predecessor from among the ashes of oblivion. That this is to be a private homage is also suggested when we see the poet moving from ‘sing dool’ (stanza 1) to ‘heave a sigh’ (stanza 2) – from lyrical public mourning to silence.

**Stanza 3**: *If there is a man whose judgment is so perfect that he can guide others’ lives but himself gives in to mad passions and surrenders to unprincipled, incomprehensible whims like the wild waves, that man lies here in this grave. One who wishes to view such a strange man should stop here and see and wonder at the mystery of human nature even as he begins to shed tears*.

This stanza brings together the lives of Fergusson and Burns, and muses and mourns over the strange, paradoxical nature of the poet. His judgment (expressed in his poetry) is ahead of society and shows the true, moral path along which all men should proceed. He is the philosopher and guide to his people, the seer or ‘vates’ as Plato called him and considered dangerous because his vision can overturn the state with revolutions. The metaphor of navigation is used in the phrase ‘teach the course to steer’, bringing to mind the image of the poet as captain, saving and guiding helpless people on board in a dangerous sea, or the image of the prophet or messiah teaching a faith. These images suggest that his ‘judgement clear’ makes him a perfect model, but the personal life of the poet is a ‘mad career’ rocked by wild passions and dangerous pursuits of beauty, throwing temperance and moral order to the air. This obverse of clear judgment may seem absurd to common sense, but is the true nature of the Romantic poet – as Keats later understood in his odes to Psyche and Melancholy. The poet’s life is an adventure beyond the normal boundaries of human nature – he brings new light for his people at his own peril, like Prometheus. Burns recognizes this paradoxical truth to be the essence of the poet’s career – demonstrated by Fergusson’s life and his own. What the ordinary man can only do is suggested in lines 5 and 6 – ‘pause’ and ‘survey’ – stand back and wonder at the inscrutability of human nature. The ‘starting tear’ is also the poet’s: ‘starting’ may carry both the senses of ‘beginning’ and ‘startled into realization’. Altogether, a feeling of immense waste looms over the stanza, along with a sad recognition of the peculiar fate of the poet.

Stanza 4: *The bard in the grave (‘poor inhabitant below’) had been an avid learner and achieved great wisdom. He also bore a strong love for fellow beings, and was alive to the subtler faculties of imagination and aesthetic perception (‘softer flame’). But he squandered all these gifts and faculties due to his intemperate, undisciplined living – committing ‘thoughtless follies’ that brought him to his own destruction. Thus, tragically, his life came to an ignominious end, and his great fame as poet was ‘stain’d’.*

This stanza continues to describe the dead poet and lament over his strange and sorry predicament. His was a bright mind in vital connection with the pulse and motions of the world, and his sensual perceptions/feelings were turned to ideas that added into bodies of knowledge which returned to guide life as wisdom. Burns indicates that ‘to learn’ and ‘to know’ are different but connected processes, and this is in line with the theories of cognition and knowledge-building expounded by philosophers from Locke to Hartley, on which the Romantic poets based their aesthetic creed. The ‘friendly glow’ of the third line means both the poet’s love for all humanity, and God’s loving presence in all and each of nature and living beings, manifested in organic form and entering the mind through sensory feeling. Both the words ‘glow’ and ‘softer flame’ suggest divine glory, ‘keenly felt’ by the poet who achieves this communion through aesthetic engagement with the world. The ‘softer flame’ also includes the faculty of imagination – the bridge that for the Romantic poet links the human world and the divine. While the poet with all these extraordinary gifts was expected to soar to an angelic height, he nosedives into low fruitless pursuits. Moving into blind alleys of worldly desire, his faculties are dulled and misused. He begins to suffer, and wades through wretched miseries. Though this may seem strange, it is his finer qualities – his aptness to learn, know and feel – that raise him to a sharper, fuller sensibility and goads him irresistibly towards self-obliterating obsessions. In lamenting these ‘thoughtless follies’ Burns perhaps remembers the madhouse days of Fergusson, and unknowingly prognosticates the drunken debauchery and rheumatism of his own last days. This self-destroying hedonism is an inescapable trait of the Romantic poet, most prominent in the lives of the Scottish bards.

**Stanza 5**: *Reader, listen to what I say, whatever be your nature. You may be imaginative – your soul may travel far in flights of fancy. Or you may be of dull, pragmatic bent – satisfied in the dark, repetitive rhythms of earthly life. Whatever you be, high or low, know this – prudence, caution and self-control are the roots of true wisdom*.

This is the conclusive stanza where the experience of visiting the grave and thoughts and reflections thereupon comes to its final emotive and intellectual end. Contemplating on the lives of Fergusson, himself and the prototypical Romantic, Burns comes to realize the value of temperance. Balance – meant by ‘prudent, cautious, self-control’ – is the key to success and fame, as also to wisdom. Beyond the ‘judgement clear’ of the poet, which may show people the true road but is precarious since it cannot wean the poet away from his dissipation, lies the wisdom of the sage – combining feeling with reason and controlling all experience with a moral order, providing stable progress for all mankind. The high and the low (imaginative and earthbound) must all know this saving truth, without which all success should be but momentary. Prudent self-control is what the poet lacks, and so is overwhelmed by the wealth of experience. The moral lesson is mingled with this sad realization – Burns feels this himself as much as his reader – a lesson received through pain and failure and death that touches him dearly. It is through melancholy that ‘wisdom’s root’ is found; confirming the Romantic belief that melancholy is the unavoidable path to wisdom.

Sample questions: 2 marks

1. What is meant by ‘owre proud to snool’?
2. Explain ‘or darkling grubs this earthly hole’.
3. Who is the ‘bard of rustic song’? why is he ‘noteless’?
4. What does ‘life’s mad career’ mean?
5. What is indicated by the ‘softer flame’ in stanza four?

Sample questions: 5 marks

1. How is the ‘whim-inspired fool’ characterized in stanza one? Who is he?
2. Why does the man in the grave meet his fate with a ‘judgement clear’?
3. What is the message from the poet in the last stanza?
4. How did the ‘poor inhabitant below’ fare in matters of knowing?
5. What elements in the dead man’s nature did stain his name, and how?