ISSN 1753-2396 (Print)
ISSN 2753-328X (Online)

Journal of
Irish and Scottish Studies

Articles

Setting His Own Standard: James Orr's Employment of a Traditional Stanza Form

Author: Carol Baraniuk

Volume 1, Issue 1
Pp: 73-86
2007
Published on: 1st Jan 2007

1495
ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Setting His Own Standard: James Orr's Employment of a Traditional Stanza Form

Carol Baraniuk

The close engagement of the eighteenth-century Ulster-Scots radical poets with the works of Burns has recently attracted scholarly interest,[1] but as John Hewitt pointed out over thirty years ago an Ulster tradition of writing in Scots began well in advance of the Burns era:

> [. . .] the first printed verses by a local author in Scots figure in a broadsheet from Strabane, about 1735, in the stanza sometimes called after Burns, but far older than his practice, and more accurately known as Standard Habbie [. . .] A little later than the Strabane broadsheet, our first anthology of prose and verse, *The Ulster Miscellany* (1753) has a section of seventeen pages under the heading of Scotch Poems, several of which specifically relate to the Scots-planted pocket in east Donegal.[2]

Several generations after the Ulster Plantations, the descendants of former colonists appear to have remained hungry for Scots reading material. Certainly, even before Allan Ramsay began producing contemporary vernacular works, literary masterpieces of the Middle Scots period were being re-printed in Belfast. These included Alexander Montgomerie's *The Cherrie and the Slae*[3] and the *Works* of Sir David Lindsay.[4] Also popular were *The Bruce* of John Barbour, Blind Harry's *The Life and Acts of Sir William Wallace* and lurid tales in English relating the experiences of persecuted Covenanters.[5] Reading habits suggest that throughout the eighteenth century, the Ulster-Scots identified with Scotland's heroic, independent past and her national

[1] Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth Century Scotland* (East Linton, 2002), 220–40.

[2] John Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers and Other Country Poets of Antrim and Down* (Belfast, 2004), 3.

[3] Re-printed in Belfast in 1700.

[4] Re-printed in Belfast, 1714.

[5] J. R. R. Adams, *The Printed Word and the Common Man: Popular Culture in Ulster 1700 – 1900,* (Belfast, 1987); Appendix I, "Ulster Publications, 1699 –1800", 175–81.

and religious martyrs. The appetite for potentially subversive texts can only have been sharpened by those aspects of the Penal Laws, such as tithes and Test Acts,[6] to which Presbyterians were subjected. Those Ulster poets who produced vernacular verse, therefore, were responding to local demand and supplying a well-established market.

Naturally, once a branch of the Scots literary tradition had taken root in Ulster it developed its own character, not least through close engagement with specifically Irish issues and the exploration of these from a northern dissenting viewpoint. In the hands of the best poets, such as the United Irish radical, James Orr of Ballycarry, the result is a unique exploitation of traditional Scots genres and language which expresses a too-long unacknowledged aspect of Irish identity.

John Hewitt credited Orr with 'a craftsman's authority' in his manipulation of the great Scots stanza forms.[7] Undoubtedly his handling of standard habbie is both fluent and secure, but he followed in the wake of the three Scots masters, Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns, each one of whom, in diverse ways, made this form his own. This essay will explore James Orr's employment of standard habbie and his success in finding expression for his unique voice within this familiar structure. In this respect, Orr's work may also be seen to represent a further stage in the stanza's evolution.

The general effect of the stanza's pattern is friendly to satirical verse. The initial three rhyming iambic tetrameters permit an idea to be set out and apparently concluded in the following dimeter, but lines five and six, which echo the rhyme scheme of three and four, may be utilised for the addition of a satirical rider or cynical afterthought. Robert Semphill of Beltrees exploited some of the possibilities of the form in his mock elegy 'The Life and Death of Habbie Simpson' in which the re-iteration of the fact that 'Habbie's dead', with minimal variation throughout thirteen stanzas, progressively generates a reductive effect that undercuts the professed grief of the speaker.

While the roots of the form may be traced to troubadours who performed in a courtly setting, Alan Ramsay successfully employed standard habbie to voice the thoughts of tavern and brothel keepers, or of their clients. Furthermore, he sited it firmly within the poetry of the city, revealing an alternative Edinburgh that could be both riotous and irreverent, as the following lines from his 'Elegy on Maggie Johnson' illustrate:

---

[6] The Test Act required any person wishing to hold public office to take the sacrament in the Anglican Church.

[7] Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, 94.

Fou closs we us'd to drink and rant,
Until we did baith glowre and gaunt
And pish and spew, and yesk and maunt,
Right swash I true;[8]

Despite the apparent subversion of propriety, however, the conclusion of Ramsay's 'Elegy' offers a reminder of a more conventional moral framework. The uncomfortable issue of judgement in the afterlife is raised, while in an echo of 'Habbie Simpson', the speaker grimly stresses the irrevocable finality of death:

Let a' thy gossies yelp and yell,
And without feed,
Guess whether ye're in heaven or hell,
They're sure ye're dead.[9]

Robert Fergusson, in 'The Daft Days'[10], also chooses to celebrate the tavern culture of the capital, but builds on Ramsay's achievement to produce a work of far greater complexity and sophistication. The opening meditation, an atmospheric representation of the countryside in 'mirk December', allows him to incorporate elements of pastoral, but as a prelude to the speaker's rejection of the fields in favour of the vigorous conviviality of city life on dark winter evenings. The poem effectively voices the drawing power which the city continually exercises, particularly over young people, in every generation, while the celebratory mood thus engendered is further extended to accommodate cultural nationalism. His scenes of 'mirth' and 'social cheer' never attain the level of excess depicted in Ramsay's anarchic cameos, but the stanza's association with insubordination and dissidence is perpetuated in Fergusson's mocking finale. Here, with assumed piety, he supplicates the 'great god of Aquae Vitae', for protection from the forces of law and order whom he disrespectfully designates "that black banditti, / The City-Guard".

Though Ramsay and Fergusson exploited standard habbie with great originality, Burns may be said to have customised it, employing it to portray numerous highly individual personalities and as a vehicle for the expression of

[8] Allan Ramsay, 'Elegy on Maggie Johnson' in A. M. Kinghorn and A. Law (eds), *Poems by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson* (Edinburgh, 1974), 4.
[9] Ibid., 6.
[10] Ibid., 121 – 3.

his own multi-faceted verse persona. His dramatic monologue, 'Holy Willie's Prayer', is potentially as shocking as Ramsay's 'Lucky Spence's last Advice', but exhibits a much more finely-tuned form of satire as Burns exposes the deception of others and of self that typifies the religious hypocrite. Donald Low has commented that 'It is difficult to over-estimate the significance of 'standart habbie' in the case of Burns',[11] pointing out that Burns greatly extended the range of its possible applications. As examples Low cites the 'Elegy on Captain Matthew Henderson', in which the stanza is shown to be suitable for the expression of genuine grief, and 'The Vision' which widens its range still further to 'include the communication of serious ideas'.

Certainly, all the major themes of Burns's *oeuvre* are explored in the standard habbie poems: religion, his poetic calling, Scotland and its symbols, regional identity, natural beauty, friendship, sexual conquest and radical opinions. The richness of this component of his work is in large part due to the variations in voice he achieves within and between poems. He speaks as Rab the Ranter, Robin Ruisseaux, Robert Burns, as the libertarian, the passionate lover, the predator, the rationalist, the guid billie, the tease, the penetrating satirist, the inspired visionary, the irreverent rhymer. Through this series of skillfully-adopted poses, it becomes clear that Burns the poet is determined to resist pigeon-holing by remaining elusive, uncommitted and apart.

Consider first of all those verse epistles in which Burns himself appears to speak through the medium of a first person narrator. Liam McIlvanney argues that these are genuine, intimate letters which 'put the reader in a subordinate position, looking over Burns's shoulder at verses meant principally for the eyes of another [. . .]. The epistles shut us out [. . .]. The result is a self-regulating community that requires no corroboration, no endorsement from the outside world'.[12] McIlvanney also characterises the epistles as a kind of 'pub talk or blether',[13] an evaluation borne out by reference to much of the content. Such talk is rarely noteworthy for its sensitivity or diffidence and, certainly, the voice in the 'Epistle to John Rankine'[14] is that of a swaggering sexual predator, 'a rovin with [his] gun [. . .] of guns the whale'. The same poem expresses the speaker's exasperation with the busy-bodying of the moral guardians from the 'Poacher-Court' and 'all their blethers', independent sentiments which many

[11] Donald Low, *Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1986), 47.

[12] Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical*, 103.

[13] Ibid., 102.

[14] Robert Burns, *The Complete Poetical Works,* ed. James A. MacKay (Darvel, Ayrshire, 1997), 82–4.

twenty-first century readers would endorse. It must be acknowledged, however, that the objectifying and belittling of the woman as 'a paitrick', 'it' and 'a poor wee thing' achieves a less than timeless resonance. The poet's welcome to his illegitimate daughter demonstrates a more responsible treatment of the consequences of sexual adventures even as it challenges conventional attitudes. Here the impression created is of a man of intense tenderness, courage and natural justice:

> And if thou be what I wad hae thee,
> An tak the counsel I shall gie thee,
> I'll never rue my trouble wi thee –
> The cost nor shame o't –
> But be a loving father to thee,
> And brag the name o't.[15]

'Adam Armour's Prayer' appears to have been written in disgust, to expose bullying which is masquerading as the enforcement of high moral standards. Burns effectively captures a narrative voice of gloating, thuggish bravado and sexual sadism, showing how the process of mob 'justice' allows free rein to the worst aspects of human nature:

> [. . .]we stang'd her through the place,
> An hurt her spleuchan [. . .].
> As for the jurr – puir worthless body!
> She's got mischief enough already;
> Wi' stanget hips and buttocks bluidy
> She suffer'd sair;[16]

As the speaker lingers with satisfaction over the intimate details of the humiliation and of the wounds to the female parts, one suspects that the suffering inflicted has contributed to his own arousal. The poem provides further evidence of Burns's capacity to stand apart from his community, at odds with its judgementalism and its licensed brutality.

While on some occasions Burns seeks to give the impression of carelessness in composition, claiming that his verses come 'rattling at ither's arses',[17] in the

[15] Ibid., 113.
[16] Ibid., 198–9.
[17] 'To A Haggis', ibid., 264–5.

case of 'The Vision' he is very deliberate in setting a tone and atmosphere that make a prelude to a deeply significant and spiritual experience. In this work of exceptional gravitas Burns proposes his poetic calling, demonstrating a sense of his own ability and purpose that sets him far apart even from the bardic fraternity of the epistles. Through references to rhyme, ploughing and 'my bonie Jean' Burns constructs a persona clearly intended to be understood as his own. Though initially startled by the appearance of his Muse, typically, when confronted by a female presence, his brashness quickly reasserts itself:

> And such a leg! My bonie Jean
> Could only peer it;
> Sae straught, sae taper, tight an clean –
> Nane else came near it.[18]

The whole encounter, including the Muse's revelations, her instructions and Burns's implicit acceptance of the commission, makes evident his remarkable self-confidence. However, the audacity (as some might consider it) of his claim to be writing in obedience to the commands of Scotland's presiding poetic genii, is ingeniously embedded within a rich, rhetorical, sensuous composition that cannily includes very proper-sounding allusions to his own rusticity and lowliness:

> 'I taught thy manners-painting strains
> The loves, the ways of simple swains
> Till now, o'er all my wide domains
> Thy fame extends;
> And some, the pride of Coila's plains
> Become thy friends. [. . .]
>
> Then never murmur nor repine;
> Strive in thy humble sphere to shine;
> And trust me, not Potosi's mine,
> Nor king's regard,
> Can give a bliss o'ermatching thine,
> A rustic Bard. [. . .]'[19]

[18] Ibid., 116.
[19] Ibid., 120–1.

The work may appear contrived to cash in on Burns's popular image as ploughman-poet/rustic genius, but as the Muse's theme develops no hint of irony is permitted to disturb the mood. Rather, the dignity and consequence of the poet's status and calling are thoroughly enhanced. In this respect, despite massive differences in register and subject, 'The Vision' discloses the poet's isolation, his sense of separateness from the mindset of 'simple swains', every bit as much as does 'Adam Armour's Prayer'.

Undoubtedly, Burns brought unprecedented sophistication and variety to composition in standard habbie, exploiting its flexibility to the full. What more could possibly be achieved by any following poet who chose to employ it? Would not any work produced inevitably appear imitative of something Burns had already accomplished? If one explores the Scots poetry produced in Ulster, however, it becomes clear that new light could indeed brighten an old window.

James Orr's handling of standard habbie, which he employed in seven poems, is more than merely competent. In these works he effortlessly adopts the stance of a man rooted within his community and closely identified with it. He evokes its life, acts as its spokesman, and, when appropriate, gently satirises. Linde Lunney of the Royal Irish Academy has written of Orr's 'intimately structured community where everyone is known', and of his 'almost mystic perception of rootedness'.[20] It is in the vernacular standard habbie poems that this inter-connectedness between his life and the lives of his neighbours becomes most apparent.

With the exception of some months beginning in the autumn of 1798 which he spent in Philadelphia, James Orr lived the whole of his life (1770–1816) in the village of Ballycarry. The village, in the east Antrim hills, was situated in a district that had been settled by Scots in the late sixteenth century and the Scottishness of its language, customs and culture remained evident to observers more than two hundred years later.[21] The Reverend Edward Brice established Ireland's first Presbyterian congregation there *circa* 1613 and by the time of Orr's birth Ballycarry was almost exclusively Presbyterian. Literacy was of a good standard in the area for the Scots had quickly founded a school in the

[20] Linde Lunney, 'The Nature of the Ulster-Scots Language Community' in John Erskine and Gordon Lucy (eds), *Cultural Traditions: Varieties of Scottishness* (Belfast, 1997), 113–27.

[21] A. Day, P. McWilliams and N. Dobson, (eds), *Parishes of County Antrim 10, 1830–1, 1833–5, 1839–40* (Belfast, 1994), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland*, XXVI. References to the Scottish speech and cultural traditions of many among the Ulster population may be found throughout the Memoirs for Antrim and Down.

parish, though Orr's father, a handloom weaver, personally educated his son at home. The village economy rested on small farming and the (then) cottage-based processes of the linen industry.

Local tradition holds that during the United Irishmen's Rebellion of 1798, all the men of Ballycarry turned out in support.[22] While they were no doubt influenced by the United Irish democratic agenda that had been inspired by Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man,* many of the Ballycarry contingent may in the main have wished to strike a blow against the requirement to pay tithes to the alien but established Anglican church. Orr's writing, however, reveals the genuinely global scope of his own radicalism. It was this that led him to command a troop of Ballycarry men at the rebels' mustering ground on Donegore Hill in County Antrim, on June 7, 1798, and it was for his active role in the failed Rising that Orr was forced to go on the run, eventually as far as America, until an amnesty permitted his return to Ireland after some months. His relief at being home again is recorded in a verse epistle to his fellow poet, Samuel Thomson:

> For me, we' a' that's come an' past,
> I'm at my ain fire-side at last,
> Fu' blythe, [. . .][23]

Orr settled back into village life, supporting himself by following his father's trade as a weaver. While he never married, he was active in the Masonic Lodge, the local Reading Society and in the writing of verse. As a young man he had composed political pieces for the United Irish newspaper, *The Northern Star*, and while in America he continued to publish. Following his return the Ballycarry community acknowledged his gifts by according him the status of village Bard.

If the bardic fraternity in Burns's locality was a self-regulating, rather exclusive society, in the Ulster of the Long Eighteenth Century the Bard had a public, quasi-official status. Throughout the Province, from County Down to Donegal, many village and townland communities honoured certain gifted individuals with this title. These individuals would employ their poetic skills to

---

[22] Orr's *Christis Kirk* poem 'Donegore Hill' presents a different picture, alleging that some of the men hid themselves to avoid taking part in the Rising.

[23] James Orr, *The Country Rhymes of James Orr, the Bard of Ballycarry (1770 – 1816),* J. R. R. Adams and Philip Robinson (eds), Volume 2, in *The Folk Poets of Ulster* (Bangor, 1992), 72.

entertain, commemorate, and sometimes to castigate. They would comment on local affairs, but also on national and international events. Many bards, Orr among them, published their works by raising subscriptions from their friends and neighbours.

Orr produced poetry in English and in the 'Braid Scotch' vernacular. Much of his work, written from the viewpoint of an 'insider', celebrates life in the rural community which he frequently portrays as a sociable, supportive environment. This is particularly true of the seven poems he wrote in standard habbie. His most well-known work in this stanza is his ode 'To the Potatoe', from which Hewitt included an extract of verses in the anthology section of *Rhyming Weavers*. Hewitt's desire to highlight distinctive regional culture led him to choose those stanzas which describe the varied, wholesome, local dishes that were created using potatoes. Orr is actually following a Scots tradition of celebrating regional food which, in the eighteenth century, stretches back to Fergusson and Ramsay, but in other ways 'To the Potatoe' is a work of far greater intricacy than Hewitt's anthology suggests. It incorporates Orr's most open and defiant expression of radical sentiments, while asserting Ireland's capacity for self-sufficiency and resistance to oppression, with England specifically portrayed as a bird of prey. It also provides insight into Orr's preferred means of challenging injustice: non-violent direct action. In addition, Orr powerfully evokes community life within the poem, showing that the potato serves as a focus for its every aspect, domestic, social or labouring:

> The weel-pair't peasants, kempin', set ye;
> The weak wee boys, sho'el, weed, an' pat ye;
> The auld guid men thy apples get ay
> Seedlin's to raise;
> An' on sow'n-seeves the lasses grate ye,
> To starch their claes.[24]

Drawing on his insider's knowledge, he presents the figures and seasonal activities he observes, investing them with archetypal or ritualistic qualities. While keenly aware that the locality represents the nation in microcosm, Orr is clearly writing as the Bard of Ballycarry, committed to the village community and sharing in its life.

[24] Ibid., 2.

'Tea', a comic monologue, portrays Orr himself in his role as local entertainer, declaiming a mock eulogy in praise of the popular beverage. The piece is supposedly addressed to a group of friends who have just called and are now waiting for the kettle to boil. With tongue firmly in cheek he depicts himself as a 'rude' rhymer and his audience as habituated to 'strains sublime'.

Once the guests are settled comfortably Orr extols tea's virtues, in a series of humorous cameos from which its importance to rural life may be inferred.[25] It has intrinsically soothing properties, effective against 'weed' and 'head-ach', but more importantly, a present of tea can deflect a wife's wrath from her late-returning, 'sot' of a husband. At this point in his narrative, in an effortless transition to mock heroic mode, Orr vigorously denounces the secretive, selfish streak which love of the beverage can develop in a wife:

> But blast the smuggler, fause an' fell,
> Wha brews't in tinfu's by hersel;
> An, bribes the sma-craft no to tell
> Their drudgin' daddy;
> Deel nor he'd ay bounce in, pell-mell,
> Just when 'tis ready.[26]

The quotation provides an example of Orr's poetic craftsmanship in which he speedily sketches a minor domestic crisis, exhibiting a dry (bachelor's) cynicism regarding the marital relationship. The alliteration employed in 'fause and fell' augments the melodramatic tone, while the imagery points to a conspiracy in which the wife is exposed as the corrupter of her innocent children. The 'echo' lines, five and six, allow the voice to modulate from that of the scandalised narrator to the affronted tones of the wife, while the eagerness of the industrious but hoodwinked husband for a reviving cup is vividly conveyed by the energetic 'bounce in pell-mell'. As he lampoons the wife's selfishness and betrays sympathy for the man's naivety, Orr is clearly confident of amusing an audience whose sense of humour he understands and endorses.

As the poem develops, the spae wife who reads the tea leaves, the girls who seek 'The story o' their future match', the gossips who gather round 'the auld delft nipple' to savage the neighbours, the youth 'tortur'd' by some 'slee jilt' are presented in turn and affectionately mocked. While irony is undoubtedly

[25] D. H. Akenson and W. H. Crawford, *James Orr, Bard of Ballycarry* (P.R.O.N.I., 1977), 60.
[26] Orr, *The Country Rhymes of James Orr*, 5..

present, its purpose is to delight the audience as they recognise themselves and their neighbours. No shock, disgust or offence is intended.

Several of Orr's standard habbie poems adopt the format of verse epistles within which he continues to give prominence to conviviality and friendship in a community context. The verse epistle addressed to Thaunie, a talented local blind fiddler, allows him, mindful of his bardic role, to honour individuals who played an important part in village life, in Thaunie's case as a musician and story-teller:

> Frae ilka neuk the spunkies stauncher
> To hear your stories;
> The roof re-echoes ev'ry nicher,
> An' every chorus.

Orr records the poor's capacity to enjoy themselves with unsophisticated but lively pleasures that can briefly dispel the hardships and poverty of rural life:

> Let us be tir'd or barley-sick,
> Or crav'd for debts, wad cowe auld Nick, [. . .]
> Ae flourish O' your fiddle-stick,
> Sen's care to Cloutie.[27]

The poem is of particular interest in that it provides a clear example of the extraordinary oppositions, the sensitivity and bluntness, that are characteristic of the Ulster-Scots psyche. Thus Orr can address, without a hint of patronising, Thaunie's blindness, praising his fine 'bairntime' and his canny choice of an exceptionally attractive wife, despite his regrettable inability to see her. In the next breath, however, he comically deplores the 'jads as gruesome as my grannie / Thraun reestet deels' that are inexplicably courted by many 'seein' chiels'.

In addition to his musical skills, Thaunie the fiddler excelled in theological debate as is made clear through the poem's reference to the 'New Licht' controversy. Another verse epistle, *To Mr A********, Carrickfergus* also points up the strong influence of the Kirk in local life. Orr never fell foul of the 'unco guid' as Burns had done, but he did not always welcome the ministrations of

[27] Ibid., 67–9.

the covenanting or more conservative Presbyterians. As he recounts with some engaging self-mockery the details of a long illness he suffered and the various visitors who arrived to bring him comfort, he does not accuse 'the grunters, grave' of hypocrisy but in some frustration and astonishment he exclaims against the gloominess of their conversation when they quoted texts 'again' me' or 'Discours'd O Nick'. Irritated and perplexed he adds, 'Deel rive their jaws! What can dispose them to scare the sick?'[28] The sudden and appropriate curse provides a clear example of the natural talent for invective possessed by most Ulster-Scots speakers.

Orr frequently functioned as the voice of protest on behalf of his community, and thereby on behalf of all the poor. His 'To a Sparrow' invites comparison with Burns's 'To A Mouse' or 'To a Mountain Daisy'. Its opening is very similar to that of the former:

> Wee, wanton, little thought o' birdie!
> Pert, keen an' crouse, an' unco wordie [. . .].[29]

The poem arose out of an incident in which he observed some boys robbing the bird's nest and he muses on a universal lesson that may be drawn from the experience. His compassion for the creature's helplessness is as tender as is Burns's for the mouse or the daisy, but the Scots bard's guilt, self-pity and fearfulness are entirely absent. Orr's concern for the oppressed and his abhorrence of cruelty are to the fore; his attention is focused on man's inhumanity and its effects rather than on his own experience. First, he compares the sparrow's fate to that of a poor widow suffering eviction, whom 'rich, rude ruffians teaze and taunt', then to a poor man robbed by violent house breakers of his few possessions scraped up 'wi' mickle pains'. His chief concern is about the devastating effect on the individuals involved and thus on the security and harmony of community life. His moral, underlined with a Biblical reference, sites true courage alongside compassion for the weak:

> Thou needna think this outrage odd,
> For man's to man, like goose an' tod,
> But still the brave will rapine, blood,
> An guile bewaur o'

[28] Ibid., 66.
[29] Ibid., 11.

An spare the creature o' their god,
Tho' but a sparrow.[30]

A much more personal work in standard habbie is 'A Fragment: Of an Epistle to Mr W. H. D.' in which Orr begins exploring directly his poetic persona and reveals his self-doubt. In the 'Address: To Mr A********, Carrickfergus', he had referred self-deprecatingly to his 'scraps o' metre'. In 'A Fragment: Of an Epistle to Mr W. H. D.' he goes much further, expressing frustration at what he considers his inability to match his words to his soaring vision: 'I *see* an *feel!* But canna sing'. As he discusses the types of poetry at which he would wish to excel he demonstrates a keen appreciation of each genre named: sensuous nature poetry, patriotic verse and 'manners-painting rhymes', an overt allusion to Burns's 'The Vision'. A restrained but lyrical opposition, expressed in the third person and thereby avoiding the impression of self-pity, articulates the conflict Orr senses between his achievement and his desires: 'The cuckoo sings obscurely low / The lark aspires'. The poem is indeed a fragment and remained undeveloped, but perhaps here Orr is more disingenuous than he seems, for despite his expressed dissatisfaction with his own efforts, the poem's conclusion appears to privilege verse that arises, as he claims his own does, in an unstudied way from simple observation combined with an innate passion for rhyming. He may be hinting that a work such as 'The Vision' is rather contrived and grandiose:

Coy science spurn'd me frae her knee,
An fortune bad my shuttle flee;
But all the while, smit strangely wi'
The love o' sang,
I rudely rhyme the scenes I see,
Whar'er I gang.[31]

The effect is to promote and enhance his status as the unpretentious rustic bard, for in those final lines he cuts a lonely, sensitive, attractive and romantic figure.

Orr's standard habbie poems provide revealing insights into northern community life in eighteenth-century Ireland. They also reveal Orr's adroitness in developing his role as the Bard of Ballycarry, who celebrates and participates

[30] Ibid., 12.
[31] Ibid., 71.

in village life while reserving for himself some private, meditative space. Of all the vernacular poets discussed here, it is Orr who appears most affirming of the poet-community relationship and of the community itself, an outcome that at least in part arises from the semi-official status of the Ulster village bard. One never doubts, however, that Orr's commitment to his own people, 'warts and all', is genuine and deep-rooted. While never entirely losing the satirical edge associated with standard habbie, Orr's essays in this traditional form represent a welcome, gentle and affectionate modulation of the authorial voice.

University of Glasgow