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# BURNS'S RADICAL PARTICULARS

*"Poetry tends to give general truths"*
— Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1451b)

A reader sympathetic to Dr Johnson's adage "nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature" (*Preface to Shakespeare*, *viii*) may not have taken kindly to a poem addressed "*to a Mouse*". By choosing to focus not on the artful expression of profound truths, nor even on 'mousekind' or 'the mouse' as a general category[1], but instead on a particular creature whom the speaker disturbed one day with his plough, Burns is quite explicitly eschewing the poetic sensibilities of his time. This essay is not about the mouse, but rather about the way in which Robert Burns employs a focus on "the particular" to engage with the established stylistic modes of his era. Specifically, I examine Burns's confrontations with bureaucratic discourse, generalizing poetic diction, and finally with what we may call "systematic thought" (Simpson, *The Protean Scot*, 193).

What emerges from these confrontations, I shall argue, is a kind of "realism" (comparable to that described in Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel*) that inhabits the gaps *between* discourses, and that is thus concerned with the details that are excluded or concealed by homogenizing poetic and philosophical modes. His realism is thus fundamentally critical, though it exercises its radical force in a playful way. Furthermore, Burns's focus on the particular may be likened to his

[1] According to Piozzi's *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*, an unnamed gentleman once actually did attempt--unsuccessfully--to entertain Johnson by "dissert[*ing*] some time about the natural history of the mouse" (Piozzi, 124).

broader acceptance of temporality and impermanence. Thus it may be observed that "the particular" holds poetic, political, and even metaphysical significance in Burns's oeuvre. It must be noted that exact definitions of the terms "particular" and "general" are philosophically contested (see, for instance, P. F. Strawson, *Particular And General*), and it is difficult to define one without using the other. For the purposes of this essay, it will suffice for us to assume that the general is constructed by inference, extrapolation, comparison, and connection. The general concerns categories, qualities, processes, ideas, "universals, classes or abstractions" (Watt, 11) under which various phenomena may be substituted. The particular, in contrast, refers to individual items and phenomena; it is defined by specificity.

Exemplifying his emphasis on the particular in opposition to bureaucratic discourse is Burns's *The Inventory*, a poem supposedly "in answer to a mandate by the surveyor of taxes". In the first stanza, the polite, formal English of the opening line gradually disintegrates into Scots dialect. Though professing to merely echo his addressee's "mandate", Burns's speaker in fact translates it into a regionally specific lexicon, revealing language's rootedness to particular places (and, by extension, to particular speakers). Already the illusion of an impersonal, instrumental language begins to fall apart. The rigid form of the inventory immediately reasserts itself with the Latin word "imprimis" and the speaker's listing of "four brutes" ("brute" is also a decidedly Latinate lexical choice). Yet the structure again collapses as the speaker goes on to give his opinions of each of the horses, and reflect on his adventures with them. The humor and conflict of the poem stems from Burns's insistent articulation of that which is excluded by the deadening discourse of bureaucratic itemization. For instance, the surveyor may expect a citizen to designate the size of their family with a number. Instead Burns's narrator says, "Wi' weans I'm mair than weel contented: / Heav'n sent me ane mair than I wanted!". Contained in this

couplet is a fragment of narrative, a personal reflection, and an indication of the speaker's personality—everything but the desired quantification. What is "realistic" here (in Watt's formal sense of the word) is the commitment to the *particular* subjectivity of the speaking persona. Burns insists upon the particularity of voice not only for dramatic effect (as may be found in any poem in which a character speaks) but in explicit opposition to the generalizing language of "the surveyor of taxes".

Though Burns ends *The Inventory* with his own name (itself a forceful statement of the particular), it is important to note that his "realism" does not hinge upon the construction of one single coherent personal voice. Rather, the particularity of distinct *voices* is revealed in their juxtaposition, collision, or even coexistence within his poems. David Morris has applied Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia to Burns's poetry, arguing that he "continually intermingles diverse styles and discourses" (*Burns and Heteroglossia*, 16). Consider, for instance, the *Elegy on the Year 1788,* in which the juxtaposition of world history and prosaic events ("The Spanish empire's tint a head, / And my auld teethless Bawtie's dead") is paralleled in the juxtaposition of elevated English diction ("oh! prodigious to reflect") and Scots slang ("Ye ken yoursels, for little feck!"). Another poem in which multiple voices are jarringly juxtaposed is *A Winter Night*, which caused Thomas Crawford in 1960 to lament that "the harmony that once existed between the Scots and English sides of Burns's consciousness appears temporarily destroyed" (*Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*, 199). Crawford's error is in seeking a singular expression of "Burns's consciousness" in the poem. In *A Winter Night*, as in *The Inventory*, Burns is engaging with preexisting modes of discourse to reveal the richness of the particular details that they exclude. Here he deals not with the generalizing language of bureaucracy, but rather with the generalizing language of eighteenth century poetry.

The first part of the poem engages with the established literary form of the pastoral, again focusing on the particular details masked by strict discursive forms. The pastoral, in the classic Popean formulation, is a rigidly conventional depiction of "what they call the Golden Age" (Pope, *Discourse on Pastoral Poetry*, 120), employing idyllic imagery and rustic stock characters. The pastoral, writes Pope, "consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd's life, and in concealing its miseries" (120). Just as he commenced *The Inventory* by pretending that it would be an actual inventory, Burns begins his pastoral by invoking the north wind with a classicizing personification typical of the genre: "Boreas, fell and doure". In clear defiance of Pope's definition, however, Burns proceeds to destroy the harmonious and idyllic setting, locating his pastoral scene in a tumultuous winter storm. In Pope's great pastoral *Spring*, the happy swain Damon declares "Inspire me, Phoebus, in my Delia's praise" (l. 45). In Burns's poem, however, "Phoebus gies a short-liv'd glow'r". The contentedness with which a Damon would survey the general scene of "lavish Nature" (Pope, l. 28) is gradually eroded as Burns focuses in on such details as "the steeples" rocking, "the doors an' winnocks" rattling, "the ourie cattle"—all unsettled in some way by the "tempest wild". These are "miseries" that would surely be concealed in the Popean pastoral. The precariousness suggested by Burns's particular descriptions is at odds with the standard pastoral's domesticated, Edenic landscapes.

Burns's use of Scots dialect in this section of the poem is also noteworthy, since at the beginning of the eighteenth century the use of dialect in pastoral poetry was a contested issue (*Robert Burns and Pastoral*, 55). Pope, in his *Guardian 40* essay of 1713, satirized the notion by pretending to have found a pastoral in the Somersetshire dialect: "Rager, go vetch tha kee, or else tha zun / Will quite be go, bevore c'have half a don" (*The Major Works*, 565). The use of dialect, in Pope's parody, is coarse, unrefined, ugly, and associated with an obsession with prosaic

(therefore un-poetic) *particular* subjects like "tha kee". Implicit in this parody is the notion that dialect has no place in the artificial, Anglicized perspective of rural life that the pastoral ought to offer. Burns challenges this notion. His narrator is not a cheery, lobotomized archetype, with "manners not too polite or too rustic" (120). As in early novels of the eighteenth century in which "the character is to be regarded as a specific person and not as a type" (Watt, 20), Burns portrays his speaker as a particular personality with distinct thoughts (for instance, he pities the birds and the foxes alike) and a regionally specific language. Burns' use of dialect also reveals the linguistic diversity that is lost in the homogenization of the pastoral form. Words such as "snawy", "winnocks", "ourie", "bide", "brattle", "scaur" occur to the Popean reader as gaps in an imagined seamless English line. Yet what these words convey to us is the particularity of rural language that the strictly conventional English pastoral fails to express. The "gaps" in the line in fact reveal the "gaps" in the pastoral discourse. Burns's "realism" emerges as a realism of gaps, revealing the elements of rural psychological and linguistic life that are excluded by the homogenizing poetic mode of the pastoral.

The pastoral is not the only rigid eighteenth century poetic form subverted in *A Winter Night*. The second part of the poem is marked by the intrusion of a second voice, a "plaintive strain". Now Burns switches to a Johnsonian voice wherein particular events are subsumed by the interplay of allegorical figures representing abstract forces. The poem's subject matter shifts from the violence of nature to the "vengeful malice, unrepenting, / That heaven-illumin'd Man on brother Man bestows". The entities described are no longer observed particularities such as doors, birds and cattle, but abstract concepts such as "Oppression", "Ambition", "Woe, Want, and Murder", "Truth", "pamper'd Luxury, Flattery by her side", "proud Property", "maiden-

Innocence", *etc.* Such allegorical discourse would have been familiar to readers of eighteenth century poetry, such as in Johnson's *Vanity of Human Wishes*:

> Now Kindred Merit fills the sable Bier,
> Now lacerated Friendship claims a Tear.
> Year chases Year, Decay pursues Decay,
> Still drops some Joy from with'ring Life away;
> New Forms arise, and diff'rent Views engage (ll. 303-307)

The profusion of allegorical figures in Burns's poem is incongruous with the terrible immediacy of the preceding description. The Englishman's exhortation to sympathize comes up cold, as it were, as it fails to articulate suffering that—as Burns's speaker has just observed—affects particular things rather than abstract concepts.

The ineffectualness of the Englishman's speech is suggested by the fact that it is interrupted by a rooster's "craw":

> I heard nae mair, for Chanticleer
> Shook off the pouthery snaw,
> And hail'd the morning with a cheer,
> A cottage-rousing craw.

The farmer's own concluding moral ("The heart benevolent and kind / the most resembles God") may be read as encapsulating the plaintive voice's speech in far fewer words, or endorsing the speech of the plaintive voice, or may itself be read ironically as an instance of trite moralizing. Burns leaves us in a state of ambiguity, as we search for a sincere moral message among the profusion of voices. The rooster may remind us of the poem's earlier mention of a bird, again an articulation of uncertainty:

> Ilk happing bird —wee, helpless thing!—
> That in the merry months o' spring
> Delighted me to hear thee sing,
> What comes o' thee?

In Pope's pastoral *Spring*, the "joyous music" of birdsong was the source and justification of poetry (Daphnis asks "why sit we mute, when early linnets sing?" (l. 25)). Now, while satirizing the dominant poetic modes of his time, Burns suggests that the bird-muse is lost in a storm, its very survival called into question. Having brought into babbling collision two of the dominant voices of pompous Enlightenment poetry (Pope and Johnson), Burns simply leaves his reader in uncertainty. He is content to offer a heteroglossic pastiche of generalizing poetic forms without providing or endorsing any alternate 'correct' form of poetic discourse.

Our inability to pin down either Burns's 'message' or his poetic project at the end of *A Winter Night* may be related to what Kenneth Simpson calls "Burns's habitual dismissal of systematic thought" (*The Protean Scot*, 193). In one sense this manifests itself in the anti-intellectualism of lines such as "A set o' dull, conceited hashes / Confuse their brains in college classes!" (*Epistle To J. Lapraik*). But, more profoundly, Burns's use of multiple conflicting voices and his focus on the particular enable him to evade any form of philosophical categorization. His satires (such as *Holy Willie's Prayer*, which pretends to be from the mouth of a hypocritical Kirk elder "fash'd wi' fleshly lust") proceed from ironic impersonations. Thus they necessarily contain both criticism and empathy with their speaking subject. As Morris writes, "often Burns's satire employs the voice of his opponents or enemies, so that the poet's voice is heard only within and through the discourse of the other" (Morris, 19). As noted above in *A Winter Night*, the assumption of a voice enables Burns to avoid any prescriptive statement of his own position. Thus Nigel Leask demonstrates that in the Kirk Satires Burns was able to adopt contrary viewpoints, lampooning both the Auld Licht and New Licht theological factions of eighteenth century Scotland (Leask, 180-181). Since the particular (*i.e.* observed fact) usually

transcends ideological divisions, Burns's focus on the particular enables him to move playfully across the boundaries of established philosophies and perspectives.

Simpson attributes Burns's reluctance to profess any systematic philosophy to the curious hypothesis that "he was intellectually incapable of it" (193) and "an element of parochialism which he never shed completely" (194). In fact, Burns's dismissal of systematization ought to be understood as an extension of his poetic interest in revealing the gaps in generalized discourse. His "realism" is something that emerges through dialectical engagement with fixed categories, ideas, and poetic modes. I justify my use of the term "realism" by Watt's observation in *The Rise of the Novel* that

> the general temper of philosophical realism has been critical, anti-traditional, and innovating; its method has been the study of the particulars of experience by the individual investigator who, ideally at least, is free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs. (12)

Burns, it seems, extends the "critical, anti-traditional ... study of the particulars" to the extreme, rejecting the need to determine any coherent philosophy beyond these "particulars". Rather than offering a prescriptive philosophy, Burns's poetry expresses a mixture of ironic Swiftian evasiveness and cheerful cynicism. In *To Smith* he declares: "I rhyme for fun". In the face of such playfulness, the rigid forms of discourse are made to appear ridiculous: "a' this clatter," he writes in *To W. Simpson*, "is naething but a moonshine matter". Even when Burn seems to be espousing a philosophy, as in the egalitarian *Is There For Honest Poverty*, the poem does not offer any systematic theory. Rather it asserts—through the tautology "a man's a man"—that man is irreducible, individual, i.e. *particular*. Man, Burns suggests, simply cannot be theorized. Heteroglossia, writes Morris, "stands opposed to every homogeneous, static, unitary discourse—such as the languages of government or law—in which differences are blended, submerged or

excluded" (11). The focus on the particular in Burns amounts to articulation of such differences. Thus Burns's "realism", if we are to call it that, is a process of constant individuation, an anarchic resistance to general categories.

We have examined how Burns's focus on the particular enables him to craft a kind of "realism" that resists categorization, and instead dwells in the gaps between philosophical and poetic discourses. This in-between-ness is also, for Burns, a defining feature of experience itself. His poetry frequently recognizes the ephemeral consciousness of the speaker. In *O Were My Love Yon Lilac Fair* he fantasizes:

> When wearied on my little wing;
> How I wad mourn when it was torn
> By autumn wild and winter rude!
> But I wad sing on wanton wing
> When youthfu' May its bloom renew'd.

The tearing of the flower is inevitable. The bird (the speaker) is perpetually "on … wing". The conventional desire for immortality or eternal togetherness in love poetry (as in Shakespeare's sonnets) is replaced by an acceptance of the passing of things. We are reminded of that which the speaker of *To a Mouse* admires in the mouse: "The present only toucheth thee". As noted above in *A Winter Night*, "Phoebus gies a short-liv'd glow'r". These are all clear statements of the temporary, fleeting nature of things. It is telling that Keats, when *Visiting the Tomb of Burns*, reflected on "the short-liv'd, paly summer … won / from winter's ague for one hour's gleam". We should not expect the Bard of Ayrshire, who does not entertain the myth of permanence even in love's reveries, to tether himself readily to any one represented perspective. Indeed perhaps the multiplicity of speakers in Burns's poems is—more than a mere satirical device—a reflection of the multiplicity of selves that a man can inhabit or embody. To conceive of, and express through one's poetic voice, a coherent 'self' is *itself* an act of generalization. It is through

difference, diversity, and particularity between and within persons that our notions of individuality and individual freedom become meaningful. The particular is not only a category of phenomena; it is a state of being.

John Ramsay of Ochtertyre remarked of Robert Burns that "the poor man's principles were abundantly motley—he being a Jacobite, an Arminian, and a Socinian" (Simpson, 185). It has been my contention that Burns' poetry in fact resists categorization according to any set of "principles". Rather, Burns is concerned with the particular, the individual, and its engagement with generalizing language and thought. His chameleonic assumption of perspectives and voices enables him to explore the gaps of generalized discourse in a light-hearted and humorous way. It is typically evasive of Burns that when he comes closest to a statement of principle—in *Epistle to a Young Friend*—he advocates for self-concealment in the cloak of otherness:

> Conceal yoursel as weel's ye can
> Frae critical dissection;
> But keek thro' ev'ry other man,
> Wi' sharpen'd, sly inspection.

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