Reading Romantic Character: Communal Singularity in the Poetry of Robert Burns

By Ruth Kellar

In a letter to his old schoolmaster, John Murdoch, Robert Burns frames his literary ambitions as a kind of 'reading':

> *I seem to be one sent into the world, to see, and observe […] the joy of my heart is to 'Study men, their manners, and their ways' [Pope: January and May, line 157] […] I am quite indolent about those great concerns that set the bustling, busy Sons of Care agog; and if I have to answer the present hour, I am very easy with regard to any thing further […] I forget that I am a poor, insignificant [sic] devil, unnoticed [sic] and unknown, stalking up and down fairs and markets when I happen to be in them, reading a page or two of mankind, and 'catching the manners living as they rise'[Pope: Essay on Man, Epistle I, line 14], whilst the men of business jostle me on every side, as an idle encumbrance in their way[…]*[1]

Burns's abbreviated manifesto, written in 1783, is not immediately striking. In addition to drawing on the discourse of manners common to the earlier eighteenth century, the passage might, with its emphasis on the solitary observer's contemplation of the everyday, now seem to merely anticipate and echo the language of that more famous manifesto, Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. As scholars like Nigel Leask have noted, it is easy to assimilate Burns into a 'mainstream British Romanticism' via this probable chain of influence[2]: writing the 1800 preface shortly after reading Dr. James Currie's *Works of Robert Burns*, Wordsworth presumably drew inspiration from the editor's affixed *Observations on the Character and Condition of the Scottish Peasantry*, which attributed Burns's poetic genius to an exemplary capacity to channel the particularities of his ('rustic') class. And yet, there are idiosyncrasies in this passage that resist its subsumption into the definition of a later, markedly

English Romanticism: the 'indolence' that Burns admits, his 'answer[ing] to the present hour', does not ring the same note of purification or purging as Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquility', and his bumping along between the jostling crowds of public thoroughfares, catching on whatever arises inadvertently before him, furthers a sense of impressionability that counters the former's famous claim to record 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'.[3]

In what follows, I wish to argue that Robert Burns exemplifies an aesthetics at odds with this mainstream Romanticism: the 'expressive poetics' defined by M.H. Abrams as the 'pressing outwards' of the individual imagination[4], and what Walter Ong has similarly characterized as an overwhelming concern with 'private epiphany'.[5] 'Reading a page or two of mankind' as they happen, idling, upon present moments, Burns's poet-speakers alternatively enact a powerful perception distinct in two ways: not only do they turn outwards to attend upon the immediacy of appearance, but they also draw upon and magnify the social conventions and traditions of communal space. Other scholars have already argued that Burns produces a romanticism distinct for its sociality: Murray Pittock claims that the 'dialogism' of Burns's poetry doesn't fit into Romantic accounts dominated by the imagination[6], while critics like John C. Weston and Alan Riach demonstrate, respectively, how Burns's verse forms both draw on the local traditions of his Ayrshire community and engage speculative readers by drawing them into the dance step of an especially performative, musical meter. This turn towards identifying the particular in Burns's poetry establishes a romanticism that truly is a 'reading' of Scotland, and Fiona Stafford has gone so far as to suggest that 'local attachment', a new faith in the individual observation of 'immediate truths'[7], is a definitive if overlooked trait of Romantic writings.

And yet, I'm not sure that this critical turn towards the local and particular fully accounts for the perceptive force at work in Burns's poetry. More than painting everyday encounters as particular, Burns's poetry draws out a singularity that resides at the level of social narrative, effectively inverting the expected relation between conventional category and individual instance. Attending, on the one hand, to social 'space' (communal places, shared work, and festive gatherings), and, on the other, to social temporality (inherited traditions, categories, and idiom), Burns's poet-speakers cut across these horizontal and vertical axes of experience to read appearance in characters writ large. If these oversized

vignettes — the depiction of rural types zealously engaged in holiday rituals like Halloween, or the elongated description of a farmer's mundane encounter with a mouse — seem, at first glance, caricatured or mawkish, I argue that they in fact present a mode of character that upsets normative modes of representation. Breaking down our related binaries between particularity and type, subject and object, narrative and fact, Burns's lyric speakers accurately register phenomena by collapsing spatio-temporal experience to a point, assembling the distinct associations of a moment like the notes in a chord of music.

Burns's distinct characterization comes to the fore in a poem like 'To a Mouse', where, as in 'To a Mountain Daisy' and 'To a Louse', the speaker pauses in the middle of his daily activity, ploughing, to notice a single, minute subject. Addressing the field animal he has nearly destroyed, the speaker translates this unintended yet typical occurrence into an impression of immediacy, catching the mouse by dwelling on the relations of a particular moment. And yet, both speaker ('Man') and addressee ('Mouse') refract their encounter through social categories, springing through their expected roles into singular action:

> *I'm truly sorry Man's dominion*
> *Has broken Nature's social union,*
> *An' justifies that ill opinion*
> *Which makes thee startle*
> *At me, thy poor, earth-born companion*
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> *An' fellow mortal!*[8]

The mouse's 'startling' is an act of simultaneous recognition and surprise; at once mundane and jarring, the paradoxical relationship between farmer and rodent is captured by its combination of convention (the violent 'dominion' of humanity) and a more natural state ('Nature's social union'). If these alternative realities — artificial hierarchy and organic harmony — seem opposed, the involvement of 'Nature' and the mouse in social structures indicates their reversal and collaboration. The mouse asserts a public perspective ('opinion'); Nature comprises a 'social union'; and the human speaker, in a witty echo of the addressee's turning up out of the soil, is 'earth-born'. Recognizing, levelling, and conveying the structures of meaning through which the world appears, the speaker indirectly perceives and produces a particular yet portable rendition of a common experience.

The speaker's address goes beyond a phenomenological account of experience, however. Rather than dwelling with the conditions of perception, the speaker presents a surface battered by the minute details of the outside world. Opening his address with a lengthy list of adjectives, the speaker conveys the immediacy of the mouse by seeming to stumble over her. 'Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie', he begins, and the substitution of 'beastie' — an affectionate, yet general, term — for her specific denomination hones the sense that the speaker is so outdone by the encounter that he can only list his impressions. This amnesic elision, however, makes room for the intimacy flagged by the nickname: if the speaker's rambling exuberance delays the recognition of the mouse (not explicitly named until the seventh stanza), the protracted depiction fixes upon and dilates a particular moment. Exclaiming that his addressee 'need na start awa sae hasty not / Wi' bickering brattle'[9], the speaker captures the mouse in the immediacy of her action, referencing her departure even as he describes her present appearance in detail. As suggested by the subsequent seven stanzas which, though continuing to address the mouse, move on from her appearance to others, it is unlikely that the startled creature has stopped to hear the ploughman's discourse; and yet, the latter's soft, imperative address ('Thou need na') generates an oblique description whose uncertain ontological status is further fissured by the stanza's end. Claiming that he 'wad be laith to rin an' chase' the mouse[10], the speaker invokes alternate, potential realities with the conditional mood, leaving us in doubt as to whether his own foibles or the stillness of the mouse preempt his pursuit.

The speaker's formal address to the mouse, is, then, precisely that: a close attention to the phenomena at hand that finds clarity of focus from a distance. The speaker effects this tension by substituting one moment of the mouse for her general existence, exercising a perception that is powerful because it is partial. Imagining the 'bickering brattle' with which the mouse runs — or could, or would, or will run — away, the speaker attends from his relative height to note and magnify her tremulous motion: A 'brattle' is a 'loud, clattering noise of any kind', exemplified by such dynamic instances as the sound 'made by the feet of horses, when prancing, or moving rapidly', or by 'a peal of thunder' ('Brattle *n.*, *v.*'). The speaker thus glimpses the mouse with an acuity that outstrips the normative, spatio-temporal ways we parcel out reality by defying distinctions between actuality and potentiality, present and future.

The speaker, then, may be unable to chase the mouse because he is cowed by its singularity, the vivacity of a moment that challenges both of their perceptions. Paired with 'brattle', 'bickering' confirms the strange, social combat undergirding their immediate encounter by meaning 'to move quickly', to 'gleam' or 'flicker', and to 'fight' ('Bicker, *v*.1 and *n*.1'). Paired with 'brattle,' the semantic and alliterative redundancy of the phrase aurally performs the mouse's purported panic as the speaker's own, frantic impression of elemental danger. The speaker doesn't simply imagine and re-create the mouse's fear in a narrative of sympathy or shared experience, however — he feels his own. Falling out of the first line into the opening exclamation, the 'O' of the second, the speaker's familiar, rhetorical noise invokes the mouse's affect while also articulating his parallel reaction. Burns's use of 'O' in the other poems of the Kilmarnock edition is never followed, as it is here, by a comma, and the pause gives the impression of expiration, a pulling up short that continues the hurried, startled stuttering of the first line's descriptive catalogue and imitates the speaker's imagined pulling up of the plough. Stopping for breath, the speaker addresses the mouse with a sound that viscerally registers the impact of its immediacy. If the 'O' also denotes a moving forward, an introduction as well as an expiration, this two-toned expenditure of energy neatly captures the unique characterization perpetrated by Burns's lyric speakers, the channeling of communal work, ritual, and convention into perceptive impressionability.

While the criticism surrounding this poem often aligns it with eighteenth-century accounts of sympathy, the odd relation emerging between the 'fellow mortal[s]' in 'To a Mouse' seem to me to more like an agonistic grappling, a field of combat and perceptual distance in which mouse and man fail the humdrum gloss of categorizing narratives by fulfilling them in a vivacious, singular way. The comically overlarge types held up as a lens to the present — the loud, horse-like motions of the wee mouse, and the farmer's warlike wielding of his 'murdering pattle'[11] — both expose the rigidity of conventional expectations and distill the moment's immediacies. As exemplified by the vigorous, threatening tremor of the mouse and the cultivating destruction of the gentle ploughman, this unique address distills socio-historical types as intractable appearances that elide the particular and the conventional, the unfamiliar and the familiar, by glimpsing and magnifying a minute action.

The temporal underpinnings of Burns's unique address crystallize in the last

stanza of ‘To a Mouse’, where the speaker seems to articulate a moral built up by his preceding reflections on the mouse’s balked foresight:

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If critics like David Perkins and Carol McGuirk have disparaged the speaker’s disingenuous departure from considering the mouse his equal, I argue that he continues to perform a present with the mouse by forgetting himself: the ‘och’, like the ‘O’ in the first stanza, denotes an immediate reaction that folds his ‘backward’ and ‘forward’ peering into the current moment. Because ‘prospects’ usually denote the potentiality of future time, their surfacing in his backward gaze further suggests a physical dimension, an implicit reference to the fields just ploughed that is confirmed by his directional modifiers. His inability to see forward, then, doesn’t connote a lack of foresight so much as an acknowledgement, in light of the central action of the poem, to know what other surprises — of mice, or crops — his labor might ‘turn up’, an ignorance that conditions his productive ability to address actuality: to confront embodied phenomena rather than reduce them to exposition.

To conclude, I think that Burns exercises a poetics of perception, a unique attentiveness that construes immediate appearance as social character. The supposed ‘indolence’ with which Burns, in our opening letter, purports to ‘read’ the manners of those around him signifies a rejection of imaginative projection and an active taking up of impressionability. What I hope to continue exploring is how the stakes of this poetics might go beyond distinguishing between ‘Scottish’ and ‘English’ Romanticism by modeling a new kind of social phenomenology. Hannah Arendt has argued that the singular action we are each capable of as particular individuals — and that constitutes all effective political change — can only occur in a public space: the social narratives through which we are recognized and re-enacted by others. The problem of how to narrate the singularity of appearance without glossing over it, however, is a paradox that Burns’s poetic mode of perception might more clearly resolve. Rather than

projecting categories onto reality, Burns's lyric speakers break down this binary by assembling the associations of social time and space as the distinct features of a particular moment. The immediate action definitive of a singular being emerges, then, through a communal perception that delineates, rather than reconciles, a convergence of multiple viewpoints. Practicing a keen impressionability supported by this milieu of social narratives, Burns's lyric voices sustain a perspective of distance that brings immediacy into focus: cutting out the singularity of communal instances and performing mundane minutiae in characters writ large.In a letter to his old schoolmaster, John Murdoch, Robert Burns frames his literary ambitions as a kind of 'reading':

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(c) The Bottle Imp