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# From the particular to the universal: revolution at the heart of Robert Burns's poetics

Cameron MORIN

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- 1 In the past few decades, scholars have borne witness to Robert Burns's twofold aura as a "Scottish writer but also a world writer". Not only is the poet part of a "pervasive Scottish mythology of the demotic national character" as "the ploughman poet", but he also resonates internationally, having been translated into over forty languages and revered by the World Burns Federation, "comprising of some 400 Burns Clubs in five or six continents" (Carruthers 1–5). At first glance, what accounts for such renown is, on the one hand, the image of Burns as a lyrical chronicler of Scotland's people, landscape and rural customs of his time, and on the other, that of a lucid observer of universal truths about human nature and existence. If it is the case that some received ideas about famous literary figures should derive from remotely truthful substrata, then the ones just mentioned ought to be checked for stylistic, thematic and ideological foundations in the massive oeuvre of Robert Burns (Lomond Books; Gutenberg). This paper argues that, on a variety of levels, Burns's aesthetics are built from gradual inductions, subtle evolutions from particular sceneries to universal notions, forming a poetic paradigm at the heart of the Romantic revolution; in turn, this may allow us to locate Burns's poetry as a pathfinder of British and European Romanticism.

## 1. Reversing the ideological precedence of the universal over the particular

- 2 Burns was not a *rusticus abnormis sapiens* – an epithet given by James Sibbald in the Edinburgh Review, October 1786 (Kinghorn 76–7); however, he did simultaneously inherit from rural cultural specificities and from a literate education. Born in January 1759, he was raised by his father William, a struggling gardener and tenant farmer, and his mother Agnes Brown, who also came from a family of cotters. Burns was used to the

toils and hardships of a ploughman's life, which he paid tribute to in "The Cotter's Saturday Night":

Hoping the morn in ease and rest to spend,  
 And weary, o'er the moor, his course does hameward bend.  
 (18–19)

- 3 Young Robert was immersed in the vernacular culture of his region and Scottish rural folklore, notably thanks to his mother who spoke a fairly broad variety of Scots (Douglas 26–7); these elements are found in his best-known pieces such as "Tam O' Shanter", a distinctly narrative poem in which the eponymous main character, after a merry evening with Souter Johnnie and other drinking friends, stumbles upon a Sabbath-like reunion of "warlocks and witches in a dance" presided by none other than "auld Nick".
- 4 Nonetheless, Burns was also the recipient of a wider, Standard English-speaking education, the framework of which derived from a European canon of disciplines and authors. His father did his best to send him and his brother Gilbert to school, or provide them with a home tutor, John Murdoch; when none of these options were available, William himself taught them literature, geography and Presbyterian theology. Hence Burns was introduced to three of the dominant languages and cultures in Europe at the time: French, Latin and Ancient Greek. He discovered a pantheon of classic epic poets known throughout the continent, and some of them are directly referred to in his works, such as "Homer" and "Jock Milton": the latter being a diminutive for John Milton, and a means to put himself on an equal footing with the great English poet. His education also included the honing of his skills in the art of the epistle. Burns's first major publication in 1786, known today as the Kilmarnock Poems, was both commercially and critically acclaimed, spreading to a readership far beyond Ayrshire; he was quick in becoming a foremost figure in the intellectual shifts of the continent in the late 18th century, when he was still in his twenties.
- 5 Even though the Enlightenment as a network of ideas and ideology was not welcomed with as much enthusiasm in the British Isles as in France, the same type of universalist doctrine was sought by decision makers, in Scotland especially (Jones 268). In the wake of the 1707 Act of Union, the diversity of local languages spoken in the Scottish territories was seen as threatening and potentially corrupting for the newly created kingdom. Over the decades a movement of grammarians, lexicographers and rhetoricians strove to standardise the English language and enforce its practice so as to contribute to the unification of constituent nations in the British Isle (Strabone 237–44), which led to Lindley Murray's famous *English Grammar* in 1795 (Strabone 237–44). A number of Scottish individuals from wealthier social backgrounds aspired to anglicise their writing and speech, listing specific provincial phraseologies to avoid in polite events (Douglas 44). Burns was a contemporary of this trend towards Anglicisation aimed at reducing the influence of regional particularisms, which had gradually given rise to the belief that written manuscripts of all kinds should be rid of any Scots locution or alternate spellings, and that the formal spoken tongue should adopt the Southern English dialect. Traditional Scots was thus relegated and associated with the common people, despite some appeals for the defence of Scots and Scottish vernaculars, for instance by Adam Smith, William Robertson, and David Hume (Carboni).

- 6 The fact that English culture was the strongest rival to French on the European continent (Casanova 106–8) may account for the defence of the universal over the particular in mainland Britain, which would be quickly shunned by a small number of Scots revivalists including Ramsay and Burns. The latter was in a way conditioned by this principle, due to the classical education he received in his youth. However, thanks to his awareness of the vast diglossic range he had (Smith) he became one of its most visible detractors. In "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer", he mocks the so-called universal abstractions that the Scottish representatives in the House of Commons apply to everything else they see:

Sages their solemn een may steek  
 An' raise a philosophic reek,  
 An' physically causes seek  
 In clime an' season;  
 But tell me whisky's name in Greek: I'll tell the reason.  
 (181–6)

- 7 The circulation of the Poems of Ossian was also a European event that disrupted the literary sphere. Putting aside the question of its likely being a fabrication and totally fictional, Macpherson's work succeeded in provoking the re-evaluation of the particular vis-à-vis the universal in the years to come under the pens of Blake, Byron, Coleridge and of course Burns: "Macpherson's Ossian [is one of] the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct"<sup>1</sup>.

- 8 The relation between German proto-romanticism and Burns is threefold. Firstly, the productions and values of the *Sturm und Drang* were all direct or indirect consequences of Macpherson's poems of Ossian: indeed Herder and Goethe's 1773 manifesto *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* included an essay *On Ossian and the songs of ancient peoples*, in which the alleged purity of primeval languages was abundantly praised. Secondly, the seminal works of the *Stürmer und Dränger* influenced Burns's work. The intertextual presence of *Young Werther's* line "and the next we are parted, evered – perhaps forever" in *Ae Fond Kiss* is a case in point:

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever!  
 Ae farewell, and then forever!  
 [...]
 Never met – or never parted –  
 We had ne'er been broken-hearted. (1–16)

- 9 Thirdly, the reception of Burns in German-speaking regions raised much passion and interest among writers and critics; his works were additional fuel for the *Sturm und Drang* and Romanticism in these areas (Pittock).

- 10 The renewed defence of particularisms in Western European literature and philosophy brought forth an emerging construction of the concept of nations with their individual languages, sceneries and customs, and a *folklorist* or primitivist trend of collecting songs to offer an alternative aesthetic principle. Johann Gottfried Herder was the mouthpiece for this new set of ideas which called for a new kind of artist, one who would strive to collect all remnants of the vernacular culture in a specific region, scour the land for written and spoken testimonies, be less defined by his own artistic talent than his ability to show to all the genius of a given people through his fieldwork. His 1778-1779 collection *Volkslieder* was a putting together of texts from very different areas of Europe; by allegedly showcasing poetry from primitive ages, passed on from generation to generation in particular civilisations, he was aiming to found a cultural renewal, put

an end to the tyranny of Neoclassicism and prove the equal dignity of different incarnations of a same essence, that of humanity (Thiesse 34–43). Burns clearly inherits from these conceptions. In the final decade of his life he was especially active in collecting songs and legends to adapt them (with a varying degree of freedom) into fully-fledged poems. Burns is one of the earliest folksong collectors and editors to make a theoretical distinction between music, a form of language seen as closer to nature and more easily preserved through the ages, and words, more liable to being forgotten due to their geographical and chronological volatility:

As music is the language of nature: and poetry, particularly songs, are always less or more localised ... by some of the modifications of time and place, this is the reason why so many of our Scots airs have outlived their original, and perhaps many subsequent sets of verses: except a single name, or phrase, or sometimes one or two lines, simply to distinguish the tunes by.

(margins of Burns's personal copy of Johnson's *Scot Musical Museum*, cited in Gelbart 363)

- 11 This provided justification for his decision to rewrite some parts of the texts he collected, whereas he would leave the composition untouched (Gelbart 363–84). Burns is widely known for his rehabilitation of the satirical "Standard Habbie" in the footsteps of Ramsey and Ferguson: an antique form of stanza, following six lines in an *aaabab* rhyme pattern, with tetrameter *a* lines and dimeter *b* lines (Wilson Costa). Dating back to the 12th century, transmitted from France to England and then to Scotland by the Occitan *troubadours*, it had fallen into disuse after the Reformation but was popularised once more by Fergusson, Ramsay and particularly Burns, whose name was used to refer to it thereafter. His piece "Halloween" is the prototypical example of this folkloric romanticism. The poem has certainly partaken in the immortalisation of the traditional Scottish autumnal event of "All Hallows-Even", as an attempt to minutely describe a dozen rituals practised by a community of cotters on the 31st October. Preceding the poem itself, the reader is presented with a paratext from which the avatar of Burns the archivist emerges, with the announcement that he has interspersed the text with notes that are as many clarifications needed to fully understand the social practices at hand. Then for each stanza evoking a ritual in his idealised Scots, such as stanza 4, an extensive explanation, in Standard English and in a straightforward informative style, is provided:

Then, first an' foremost, thro' the kail,  
their stocks maun a' be sought ance;  
They steek their een, an' grape an' wale  
For muckle anes, an' straught anes.  
Poor hav'rel Will fell aff the drift,  
[...]

(28–32)

The first ceremony of Halloween is pulling each a "stock", or plant of kail. They must go out, hand in hand, with eyes shut, and pull the first they meet with: its being big or little, straight or crooked, is prophetic of the size and shape of the grand object of all their spells – the husband or wife. If any "yird", or earth, stick to the root, that is "tocher", or fortune; and the taste of the "custock", that is, the heart of the stem, is indicative of the natural temper and disposition. (Burns, Halloween)

- 12 The same documentary device is resorted to no less than eleven times for a plethora of other apotropaic rites including the roasting of nuts, the throwing of a piece of fabric in a fire, and the winnowing of grain in front of an open barn to conjure up a ghost and

find out about one's future fortunes. Burns's fervent effort to be exhaustive and complete participated in his image as the ideal folk poet, in Scotland and abroad.

- 13 Although there is no written work of Burns dealing with epistemology nor empiricism, his implicit heritage thereof is more than clear; not least in his Rousseauistic sentimental extolling of the simplicity of a lost state of nature, the primordial value of music and the inherent beauty of man's raw feelings (Tholoniati 2015):

The simple Bard, unbroke by rules of art,  
He pours the wild effusions of the heart;  
And if inspir'd 'tis Nature's pow'rs inspire;  
Her's all the melting thrill, and her's the kindling fire.  
(1-4)<sup>2</sup>

- 14 His representation of man as a passive recipient of perceptions and a deriver of subsequent ideas is at the heart of his movement from the particular to the universal. In "Scotch Drink", the poet draws the encomiastic portrait of whisky, appealing not only to the sense of taste but also sight, smell, and hearing in the opening stanzas:

Inspire me, till I lisp an' wink,  
To sing thy name!  
Let husky wheat the haughs adorn,  
An' aits set up their awnie horn,  
An' pease an' beans, at e'en or morn,  
Perfume the plain:  
Leeze me on thee, John Barleycorn,  
Thou king o' grain!  
(12-18)

- 15 Then, he effectively derives from these senses ideals of a life rid of worries and doubts:

Food fills the wame, an' keeps us livin;  
Tho' life's a gift no worth receivin,  
When heavy-dragg'd wi' pine an' grievin;  
But oil'd by thee,  
The wheel's o' life gae down-hill, scrievin,  
Wi' rattlin glee.  
Thou clears the head o' doited Lear,  
You cheers the heart o' drooping Care;  
[...]  
(25-32)

- 16 Although we assume a rather conventional break between rationalist and universalist Enlightenment versus revolutionary, particularist Romanticism, things may be in fact more fine-grained, as Enlightenment projects are increasingly studied along a continuum with Romantic ones, so that neither rationalism nor universalism are necessarily confined to one or to the other. If we think in terms of ideological ideal-types, we can argue that Burns is positioned at the precise point in the continuum where both movements clearly separate.


## 2. Aspects and variations of an inductive poetic movement: a psychomechanic account

- 17 The movement from the particular to the universal is a distinct poetic effect in Burns's writing, which relies on several devices and mechanisms. Firstly, Burns makes many efforts to particularise his poetic language. From a lexical point of view, Burns uses a

plethora of Scots terms to designate the elements surrounding him, natural features, animals, people. He consistently furnishes his English syntactic structures with Scots nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives. Run through a corpus concordancer, examples of each category in the collected poems of the Project Gutenberg include *lassie* (woman, 86 hits), *bonie* (beautiful, 257 hits), *ken* (know, 78 hits), *yestreen* (yesterday evening, 13 hits). His second main device is the oralisation of the poetic voice by way of a graphophonemic conversion. In other words, he proficiently modifies the expected written form of the English language so as to match the oral characteristics of the Scots accents from Ayrshire, to convey the impression of spontaneity and refer the reader to the original, concrete vocal enunciation the poet wishes to highlight as a "rustic bard". The morphological manipulations effectuated include *more* /ɔ:/ => *mair* /e/ (125 hits); *other* /ʌ/ => *ither* /ɪ/ (26 hits); *off* /ɒ/ => *aff* /æ/, and so on. Burns is perfectly conscious of these artificial graphophonemic peculiarities, having added several glossaries and notes to the various Edinburgh editions of his poems. Manipulations also include morphological shortening through the use of apostrophes, which accelerates the rhythms of the poems and bolsters the illusion of a genuine rustic torrent of speech: *an', o', wi', o'er, e'en...*

The particularity of Burns's poetic language is all the stronger since it relies on an intimate relationship with music and song. Ever since Antiquity in the Western world, the genre of poetry has been explicitly linked to the organic activity of singing. The most frequent musical instrument with which poets and bards were associated was the lyre, an object that accompanied and projected the voice of the singer. This symbol is portrayed in several places of Burns's poems, here the "Verses Written with a Pencil":

Poetic ardours in my bosom swell,  
 Lone wand'ring by the hermit's mossy cell;  
 The sweeping theatre of hanging woods,  
 Th'incessant roar of headling tumbling floods -  
 Here Poesy might wake her heav'n-taught lyre,  
 And look through Nature with creative fire;  
 [...]  
 (17-22)

- 18 Burns adds his own, typically Scottish interjections and oral locutions to lend additional musicality to his poetry: *Faith! Och! O!*, etc. Since Macpherson's Ossian, Scottish culture and its music had fascinated scholars and enthusiasts from all over Europe; Burns contributed to the continuation of this trend, insisting on the necessity for a good poem to be "simple" in order to be striking. Burns's theoretical stance was that music, being the form of language closest to nature, had an irreducible particularity that made the Scottish songs he handled of utmost value, akin to historical capsules.
- 19 The inductive movement from the particular to the universal constitutes a very specific paradigm within Burns's poetry. It is usually initiated by the description of a unique natural scene, or a typical situation experienced in the Scottish countryside, and gradually transitions to universals, of which we may name three major strains. For each, we offer one short example; the transitional movement, when it occurs, is noted . The movement has a type, and it has variations.
- 20 The first noteworthy strain is philosophical truths. From concrete scenes featuring particular and specific entities, the poetic voice subtly leads the reader to a generalisable conclusion about human existence or an invariable mechanism of the



world. In 'To a Mountain Daisy', Burns ponders upon a beautiful and pure flower's untimely destruction by his plough blade, and artfully transitions in the following stanza to deplore the frequent yet unjust fall of innocent girls through their naive trust in love:

☞ Such is the fate of artless maid,  
Sweet flow'ret of the rural shade!  
By love's simplicity betray'd  
And guileless trust;  
Till she, like thee, all soil'd, is laid  
Low i' the dust.  
(25–30)

- 21 Then, his own precarious condition as a poet:

☞ Such is the fate of simple Bard,  
On Life's rough ocean luckless starr'd!  
Unskilful he to note the card  
Of prudent lore,  
Till billows rage, and gales blow hard,  
And whelm him o'er.  
(31–6)

- 22 And finally, humanity itself, thus drawing in the reader:

☞ Such fate to suffering Worth is giv'n,  
Who long with wants and woes has striv'n,  
By human pride or cunning driv'n  
To misry's brink;  
Till, wrench'd of ev'ry stay but Heav'n,  
He, ruin'd, sink!  
Ev'n thou who mourn'st the Daisy's fate,  
That fate is thine – no distant date;  
Stern Ruin's plough-share drives elate,  
Full on thy bloom,  
Till crush'd beneath the furrow's weight  
Shall be thy doom!  
(37–48).

- 23 A very similar pattern is observed in "To A Mouse", the other famous address in Burns's work, where the universal endpoint is a bleak appreciation of the powerlessness of all living things faced with the power of the cosmos, and the helplessness of the human condition in time.

- 24 The second notable strain of universals paints human emotions in their alleged purity and intensity thanks to a multiplication of words belonging to their respective semantic fields. In "A Winter Night", the poet describes an evening in his house contemplating the highly evocative landscape around him:

Ae night the storm the steeples rocked;  
Poor Labour sweet in sleep was locked;  
While burns, wi' snawy wreaths up-chocked,  
Wild-eddying swirl,  
[...]  
(7–10)

- 25 then by conjuring up uncountable notions referring to negative human feelings, heading them with capital letters, and having them metaphorically interact, he confronts the scene he is beholding and draws an extensive comparison from it,

suddenly evacuating the enunciative situation to let despair and pessimism make their entry:

Descend, ye chilly, smothering snows!  
 Not all your rage, as now united, shows  
 More hard unkindness unrelenting,  
 Vengeful malice, unrepenting,  
 ☞ Than heaven-illumin'd Man on brother Man bestows!  
 See stern Oppression's iron grip,  
 Or mad Ambition's gory hand,  
 Sending, like blood-hounds from the slip,  
 Woe, Want, and Murder o'er a land!  
 (39–47)

- 26 Contrarily to the previous poem, this one puts a textual end to the movement once it has exhausted its purpose, and abruptly sends the reader back to the initial context (interruption noted #):

# I heard nae mair, for Chanticleer  
 Shook off the pouthery snaw,  
 And hail'd the morning with a cheer,  
 A cottage-rousing crew.  
 (89–92)

- 27 Other emotions frequently called upon by Burns through the same modalities include love (see "The Banks of Bonnie Doon"), happiness ("Corn Rigs are Bonnie"), grief ("A Mother's Lament") and so on. The final main orientation of the movement is towards political statements, either pointing out an iniquitous invariant in history or a moral imperative to dismantle a state of injustice. A cogent example is "The Twa Dogs". Although taking on an additional layer of fiction through the device of anthropomorphism, Burns still makes it a priority to describe the setting and the physical appearance as well as the origin of the two protagonists, starting with Caesar, a landowner's dog with a name recalling imperial Britain. Caesar shares a close friendship with Luath, a farmer's collie named after Cuchullin's dog in *Fingal*, until one day, after "many a farce":

They sat them down upon their arse,  
 An' there began a lang disgression  
 About the 'lords o' the creation.  
 (44–6)

- 28 From this specific conversation, and the comparison of each dog's lifestyle according to their masters' social background, the assessment of a widespread class struggle is derived, where oppression by the privileged few thrives:

[Caesar] ☞ But then to see how ye're negleckit,  
 How huff'd, an' cuff'd, an' disrepecket!  
 Lord man, our gentry care as little,  
 For delvers, ditchers, an' sic cattle;  
 They gang as saucy by poor folk,  
 As I wad by a stinking brock.  
 (87–92).

- 29 From observing at length the lives of the poor-folk, and despite later mentioning a universal imperative for things to change (☞ Sic game is now owre aften play'd, 140), Luath concludes that

☞ They're nae sae wretched's ane wad think:  
 Tho' constantly on poortith's brink,

They're sae accustom'd wi' the sight,  
The view gies them little fright.  
(103–6)

- 30 While Caesar goes so far as to deliver a gnomic assertion on human nature:

☞ But human bodies are sic fools,  
For a' their colleges an' schools,  
That when nae real ills perplex them,  
They mak enow themsels to vex them;  
(195–198)

- 31 Hence we see that this transitional poetic movement dons sundry thematic aspects, and degrees of achievement and variation.

- 32 In addition, the passage from the particular to the universal in Burns's poems is often explicitly referred to through the idea of transcendence. In the poet's verse-epistles to fellow artists and intellectuals, "the transition from Burns's particular communication with [an author] in the introduction to the more universal poetic concerns is facilitated by [the] *spontaneity formula*"<sup>3</sup>. See, for instance, the "Epistle to James Smith":

Dear Smith, the slee'st, pawkie thief,  
That e'er attempted stealth or rief!  
Ye surely hae some warlock-brief  
Owre human hearts;  
[...]

☞ Just now I've taen the fit o' rhyme,  
My barmie noddle's working prime,  
My fancy yerkit up sublime  
Wi' hasty summon:  
Hae ye a leisure-moment's time  
To hear what's comin?  
(1–24)

- 33 The formula relies always on an external power, whether it is a surfeit of sense impressions or a force of destiny, in this epistle both are summoned:

The star that rules my luckless lot,  
Has fated me the russet coat,  
[...]  
But, in requit,  
Has blest me with a random-shot  
O' countra wit.  
(31–6)

- 34 In many pieces, Burns summons the figure of a Muse who suddenly inspires him, breathes into him the creative fire and transcends his particular situation toward a universally sublime object of art, reminding today's reader of a common 18<sup>th</sup> century literary trope as in the "Epistle to Davie, A Brother Poet":

The words come skelpin' rank an' file,  
Amaist before I ken!  
The ready measure rins as fine,  
As Phoebus and the famous Nine  
Were glowrin owre my pen.  
(142–6)

- 35 In fact, Burns creates his own rustic muse, Coila, in his narrative poem "The Vision" that stages their first encounter. Henceforth, her summoning by the poet becomes a

means to trigger the movement from the particular to the universal almost automatically, as in the first "Epistle to J. Lapraik":

Gie me a spark o' Nature's fire,  
That's a' the learning I desire;  
Then, tho' I drudge thro' dud an' mire  
At pleugh or cart,  
☞ My Muse, tho' hamely in attire,  
May touch the heart.  
(73–8)

- 36 At the start of Burns's inductive movements, there is a plethora of natural environments and situations used as so many sources of inspiration and poetic sublimation. The poet often shows off his "encyclopaedic knowledge of nature", concerning both animals and plants (Tholoniati 2015, 75). This was most certainly due to his habit of living in the countryside, which he never really gave up despite his stays in Edinburgh and Dumfries. "[The Kilmarnock poems] are not the production of the Poet, who, with all the advantages of learned art, and perhaps amid the elegancies and idlenesses of upper life, looks down for a rural theme, with an eye to Theocritus or Virgil."<sup>4</sup>. Burns's knowledge and interest in nature manifests itself throughout his works, which includes references to dozens of species of flowers, trees, birds, fish, insects, landscape elements such as rivers, mountains and woods, references to seasons and allusions to the weather (Young 75–92). Burns was more intent on creating poetry amid a wild nature than the cultivated one increasingly seen in the aftermath of the agricultural revolution in eighteenth century Britain. Thus he keeps with the Romantic loco-descriptive tradition (Tholoniati), as he spends considerable time depicting landscapes and natural places, to rehabilitate the aesthetic dignity of particular regions of the Lowlands countryside.
- 37 Finally, from a linguistic point of view, the movement from the particular to the universal is reflected in Burns's work by a referential tendency from the former to the latter. To shed light on this phenomenon, three central notions will be used: reference, the specific and the generic. In language, reference is a basic speech act by which an enunciator designates an extralinguistic reality, concrete or abstract; its preferred syntactic category is the noun or noun phrase; the designated reality is labelled *referent*. Specificity is the uniqueness of the entity, i.e the noun refers to one and only one individual entity. At the other end of the spectrum, we have genericity: the noun then refers to a whole class or a representative of the class. Burns's referential movement can be observed with the conceptual tool of kinetism in the theory of psychomechanics elaborated by French linguist Gustave Guillaume (*Principes de linguistique théorique*). According to Guillaume, language relies on *psychomechanisms*, movements of thought that a linguistic expression intercepts at one of its stages. One fundamental psychomechanism is *kinetism*, which occurs constantly in the human mind and goes from the universal to the particular, then vice-versa. When a speaker refers to an entity, they fixate it at a given point of this dual movement (*Leçons de linguistique*). Hence, one can examine the tangible linguistic foundations behind Burns's gradual generalisation of the intercepted referents he presents in his most accomplished pieces. These points become clearer if we apply them to a sample poem, here "To a Louse". Transitional moments of universalisation are noted ☞; specific referents are in bold while generic referents are underlined.

Ha! Whare ye gaun, ye crowlin ferlie?  
 Your impudence protects you sairly,  
 I canna say but ye strut rarely  
 Owre gauze and lace,  
 Tho' faith! I fear ye dine but sparely  
 On sic a place.  
 Ye ugly, creepin, blastit wonner,  
 Detested, shunn'd by saunt an' sinner,  
 How daur ye set your fit upon her --  
 Sae fine a lady!  
 Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner  
On some poor body.  
 (1-12)

- 38 In these first stanzas, apart from some exceptional generic terms – situated in unreal or hypothetical situations – reference is as particular as can be, with a deictic and apostrophic dimension of the pronoun *ye*, clearly identified as the louse Burns is speaking to. The spatial setting of the scene, presented as known by the speaker, also explains the definiteness for a majority of these specific referents.

[...]  
 ☞ O for some rank, mercurial rozet,  
 Or fell, red smeddum,  
 I'd gie ye sic a hearty dose o't,  
 Wad dress your droddum!  
 [...]  
 I wad na been surpris'd to spy  
 You on an auld wife's flainen toy;  
 Or aiblins some bit duddie boy,  
 On's wyliecoat;  
 But Miss's fine Lunardi! fye!  
 How daur ye do't!  
 (27-36)

- 39 Reference here undergoes a mild degree of generalisation, as the speaker projects himself in another situation than that in which he physically is. This announces the final stanza:

[...]  
 O wad some Power the giftie gie us  
 To see oursels as ithers see us!  
 It wad frae monie a blunder free us,  
 An' foolish notion:  
 What airs in dress and gait was lea'e us,  
 An ev'n devotion!  
 (43-8)

- 40 Reference reaches its farthest points of universalisation, decontextualised from the original situation, denoting the entire class of human beings with *oursels* and *ithers*, and introducing abstract notions that make up the philosophical statement Burns produces about mankind's eternal worry of external appearances. Consequently the movement from the particular to the universal is central in Burns's work, not only as a philosophical and ideological principle, but also as a complex and specific poetic device and effect at work on a more technical, linguistic level.

### 3. From the universal back to the particular: the telos of the revolution

- 41 Lastly, Burns's poetry can be reassessed through its relation with the idea of revolution in its political sense, that of an intentional urge to restore a legitimate society guaranteeing man's fundamental rights.. Many of Burns's poems either denounce illegitimate and liberticidal political situations or laud the values required to defeat inequity, and such ideals are some of the resulting points of the movements described in preceding sections. The notion of revolution is developed as a return from the universal notions inductively acquired in his poems to particular situations of injustice and iniquity that he wishes to denounce and reverse. Precaution is required, however, for it is known that Burns's personality and notably his political opinions were fraught with contradiction; in some letters and poems, he supports the existing system in mainland Britain and sometimes endorses conservative values. Nevertheless, individual freedom is one crucial value taught by experience in Burns's poems. In "Scots Wha Hae", the poet remembers the battles led by William Wallace against Edward I of England to give a pure, resonating expression of freedom:

Lay the proud usurpers low!  
 Tyrants fall in every foe!  
 Liberty's in every blow!  
 Let us do or die!  
 (21-4)

- 42 Freedom is correlated with independence, and despite his contradictory positions, Burns did, more than once, defend political liberalism, or at least disapprove of liberticidal political measures, due to a very specific context in his country: the Scottish legal system at the time helped maintain a strong oppressive aristocracy that severely punished petty crimes and minor offences, or even economic misfortunes impacting small-scale agricultural workers such as his own father. In 1792 especially, when the British crown started fearing that the Revolution in France might reach British shores, liberal clubs, the rights of free speech and the writ of *habeas corpus* were all banned or suspended (Butcher 267). In a public letter to the Morning Chronicle in 1795, Burns stated "I am a Briton; and must be interested in the cause of Liberty: – I am a Man; and the Rights of Human Nature cannot be indifferent to me."<sup>5</sup>

- 43 The rejection of despotic rule is a central pragmatic consequence of Burns's universal defence of men's freedom and equality in rights. Any political leader who does not respect these two precepts is to be shunned and derided. Basing himself on beliefs derived in pieces such as "A Man's A Man for A' That" and "The Twa Dogs", Burns is not hesitant in condemning a monarch's tyrannical or abusive behaviour, as for example in "A Dream" where he directly addresses his king:

For me! before a Monarch's face,  
 Ev'n there I winna flatter;  
 For neither pension, post, nor place,  
 Am I your humble debtor:  
 [...]  
 There's monie waur been o' the race,  
 And aiblins ane been better  
 Than you this day.  
 (19-27)

- 44 Ideologically, Burns positioned himself several times apart from common Jacobite tradition, likening Tories and Jacobites to despotic villains as opposed to the stubborn, revolutionary Whigs in pieces such as "On Glenriddell's Fox Breaking his Chain" or "Here's a Health to Them that's Awa" and the "Epistle to Robert Graham".
- 45 Similarly, Burns used the ideal of freedom to reject obscurantist doctrines implemented in some strands of Christianity, especially Protestant ones. Although he is sometimes presented as such, Burns was by no means an atheist. He was at most an agnostic, and he knew his Bible: he may have believed in God, but he certainly rejected the hypocrisy of the Auld Lichts. His education was in keeping with Protestant and Presbyterian principles, his parents being both members of the Church of Scotland, founded during the Scottish Reformation by John Knox. However, he unfailingly scoffed at the obscurantist dimension of religion, especially the way it was spread by the Auld Lichts enacting "their systems of right or wrong, rewards and punishment and the arbitrary nature of God's judgment" (McGinty 236) to manipulate the crowds. This is illustrated in the biting satire of "The Holy Fair", where Peebles, one of the preachers

Ascends the holy nostrum;  
 See, up he's got the word o' God,  
 An' meek an' mim has view'd it,  
 While Common-sense has taen the road,  
 An' aff, an' up the Cowgate,  
 Fast, fast that day.  
 (139-44)

- 46 Burns accused "The Kirk" and its elders of bigotry and hypocrisy, most famously in "Holy Willie's Prayer". He also criticised the two extremes to which the Calvinistic theory of predestination led: the individual's abandonment to reckless behaviour, or on the contrary the overzealous will to produce the "signs" of election, shown by material and social success. He likened priests and churchmen to other despotic political authorities, for example in "Kirk and State Excisemen":

Nay, what are Priests (those seemingly godly wisemen)?  
 What are they, pray, but Spiritual Excisemen!  
 (5-6)

- 47 Burns's vindication of equality in moral rights led to his demand for a better redistribution of economic goods through a fairer sharing of the land. Indeed, the notion of land became central in 17th century political theory and philosophy grappling with the question of property. The question of agrarian equality was all the more important since Lowland Scotland had undergone a period of agricultural improvement in the same way as the rest of Britain. Despite a difficult start in the immediate years following the 1707 Act of Union, the Scottish economy improved thanks to the English and colonial markets. Commentators and thinkers such as Adam Smith held that it was improved agriculture, before industrial manufactures or intercolonial trade, that enabled the accumulation of resources needed to build the "wealth of a nation". However, Burns was well aware that the aristocratic British political system was not ready to adapt to this new economic prosperity and compensate farmers, who were the first producers of said wealth. In "A Ruined Farmer", the poet bears witness – with a certain degree of dramatisation – to the generalised poverty of hard-pressed tenant farmers and small landowners who had to hand over the fruits of their toils to others. He famously decried in "The Twa Dogs" the amount of abuse that some farmers had to endure and that often left them penniless.

One economic ideal Burns wished to see realised was that of a country in which each would be guaranteed a means to work self-sufficiently, independently, without the presence of an overarching and illegitimate authority, so as to receive the full amount of goods produced by labour: "devil take the life of reaping the fruits that another must eat"<sup>6</sup>. It would be anachronistic to analyse Burns's position as a socialist one, nonetheless, he bitterly criticised the ongoing capitalisation of agriculture, and the gap it was creating between a handful of owners and a pauperised mass of ploughmen.

- 48 Finally, the return from Burns's universal values to specific contexts and historical situations is most apparent when he discusses actual revolutions that were part of his contemporary environment. In the "Ode for General Washington's Birthday", the poet applies the universal ideal of freedom built in other poems to the ground-breaking events in America:

'Tis Liberty's bold not I swell:  
Thy harp, Columbia, let me take!  
[...]  
But come, ye sons of Liberty,  
Columbia's offspring, brave and free,  
[...]  
(3–26)

- 49 Butler defined five main categories Burns used to express his more committed opinions, including the acclaim of America as a land of freedom (Butler 87) seen as a promise, an opportunity to make tangible a society created not upon tradition but an improved vision of the future. When Burns deals with these issues, he puts aside his respect for the British Crown and applauds the transition from the abstract to the concrete by way of a revolution. In return, Burns's poetry was quickly exported to North America; his most famous poems were sung as revolutionary anthems and his character entered a pantheon of inspirational figures for 19th century American political liberalism supported, for instance, by Lincoln (Szasz), or Douglass (Fenton). In the "Address of Belzezebub", Burns produced one of his most bitter and amusing criticisms of the opponents to Scottish emigration to the newly-founded United States, by portraying Satan congratulating the aristocrats for striving to maintain the Old World order.

- 50 Burns expressed both hopes and hesitations regarding the French Revolution, the other European political watershed of his time. He seemed supportive from the outset of the revolts in 1789, and did not hesitate to even insult Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette in a letter to Mrs Dunlop, mentioning "the well-deserved fate of a perjured blockhead and an unprincipled prostitute" (cited in Wilkie, 356). However, to him the revolutionary principles were betrayed in 1793, especially when the First Republic started threatening to invade Britain. Burns's most remembered lines about the events in France are in "The Tree of Liberty". Here again, a return from the universal to the particular occurs. Burns does not start off the usual description of a concrete scene or object, but immediately makes use of metaphor and universal notions to introduce his subject:

Heard ye o' the Tree o' France,  
And wat ye what's the name o't?  
Around it a' the patriots dance –  
Weel Europe kens the fame o't!  
(1–4)



- 51 Then he underlines the idea of the circulation of ideas from area to area, sowing the seeds of the Revolution. In fact, the revolutionary power of this poem reaches its climax when it calls for an upheaval and the planting of a "Tree of Liberty" in Britain, despite the failure of previous attempts:

Auld Britain ance could crack her joke,  
And o'er her neighbours shine, man!  
But seek the forest round and round,  
And soon 'twill be agreed, man,  
That sic a tree cannot be found  
'Twi' London and the Tweed, man.  
(59-64)

- 52 It is even possible that he calls implicitly for the planting of one such Tree in Scotland : "What are the advantages Scotland reaps from this so called Union, that can counterbalance the annihilation of her independence and her very name?"<sup>7</sup>
- 53 All in all, this article has tried to bring about an assessment of Burns's poetic works through a prism composed of a notional triad: the particular, the universal and revolution. This prism was first introduced by Thiesse's new analysis of European Romanticism, but was never studied with special reference to one of its most important pioneers. Burns was at the heart of an aesthetic, philosophical and more generally ideological revolution, reflected in very saliently in his poetry, based on induction, experience and the local culture and speech of the Lowlands. Although he was not personally committed to the revolutionary causes supported in neighbouring countries, the universality in his work is an end as much as it is a beginning that many readers past and present have drawn upon for their optimism and their belief in making the world a better place.

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## NOTES

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  2. Epigraph prefixed to the first publication of the *Kilmarnock Poems* (1786).
  3. Steven McKenna, "Spontaneity and the strategy of transcendence in Robert Burns's *Kilmarnock Verse-Epistles*," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 22, no.1 (1987): 79.
  4. Preface to the *Kilmarnock Poems* (1786).
  5. Letter to the Editors of the *Morning Chronicle*, January 1795.
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## ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on Robert Burns's poetry, and argues that an inductive movement from the particular to the universal characterises a specific poetic paradigm developed by Burns that makes him a leading figure in British and European Romanticism, following Anne-Marie Thiesse's account of late-eighteenth century aesthetics. Following an overview of Burns's historical and philosophical context, the linguistic fields of morphophonology and Gustave Guillaume's theory of psychomechanics are used to demonstrate several aspects and variations of this poetic movement. Finally, I link this movement to the notion of revolution, arguing that the pragmatic potency of this notion provides the endpoint of Burnsian aesthetics, and further entrenches the poet's status as a Romantic pioneer.

Cet article soutient que l'œuvre de Robert Burns développe un mouvement poétique inductif du particulier vers l'universel, et que ce mouvement constitue un paradigme poétique spécifique au premier plan du romantisme britannique et européen, en lien avec l'histoire esthétique de la fin du dix-huitième siècle par Anne-Marie Thiesse. Suite à une contextualisation historique et philosophique du travail de Burns, nous invoquons notamment les disciplines linguistiques de la morphophonologie et de la psychomécanique de Gustave Guillaume pour démontrer quelques aspects et variations de ce mouvement poétique. Enfin, nous lions ce mouvement à la notion de révolution, et soutenons que la force pragmatique de cette notion fournit la finalité de l'esthétique burnside, tout en entérinant le statut de Burns comme pionnier romantique.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Burns, poetry, Scotland, 18th century, romanticism, philosophy

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