

Breaking Free and Yearning Back: The Timelessness of Scottish Literature

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Abstract: *In recent decades, it has been much more widely acknowledged than before that Scottish literature has to date retained a distinctive character which permits or even demands its study as a tradition in its own right, distinct if not entirely separate from the literary tradition of England. This paper presents evidence for the paradoxical argument that the particular distinctiveness of Scottish literature after 1707 may be said to exist both in spite and because of Scotland's loss of political independence in the Union of Crowns, being an event after which representations of time and temporality in Scottish imaginative writing assumed a special character. It is argued that this literary development was one of the consequences of Scotland's extinction as a separate political entity, and of the ideological transformation of a country whose physical and geographical shape remained, into an ostensibly history-free zone.*

In pursuit of the argument, a brief diachronic sketch is followed by the analysis of selected literary works expressing that specifically Scottish time-perception which has contributed to the particular features of post-1707 Scottish literature to the present. Ultimately, it is suggested that the persistence of certain time-related motifs, topoi, or modes beyond the present day could be seen as an important parameter for the success or failure of recent and contemporary political efforts to bring Scotland back as an equal agent on that historical stage where the past of nations interacts with their future.

A hundred years after the Union of Crowns, the separation of Scotland's past from its future was already well under way. In 1703, Scottish MP Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun saw "probably the last opportunity we shall ever have of freeing ourselves from our dependence on the English court," (Daiches 1979: 85) and shortly after this opportunity had passed, Westminster MP George Lockhart of Carnwath compared the Scots to the Jews, punished for lack of obedience to divine and divinely appointed authority:

he gave them up to the power and laws of a foreign people, and at last subverted their monarchy, defaced their government, destroyed their country,

and, as the greatest temporal curse, cut them off from having the name of a people on the face of the earth. (Szechi 1995: 249)

The latter quotation shows a presumably unintentional irony in actualising one and contradicting another meaning of the word 'temporal': the retribution spoken of here appears as material, but certainly not as transient. Though Scottish individuals survive, Lockhart insinuates, Scotland has irrevocably disappeared as a collective agent, and thus Scots find themselves detached from that historical motion which had forged their national identity. This identity, we must thus conclude, is then condemned to remain both ghostlike and static, suffering from the lack of a politically palpable body and from the community's resulting inability to initiate and experience that dialectic of organic change and continuity which makes for the integration of monadic-individual into collective-generic history.

Over a period of three hundred years, this quandary has both constrained and inspired Scottish literature, in the conscious as well as in the unconscious aspects of literary creation. On the conscious side, Scottish writers of the 18th century became actively engaged in a vogue of antiquarianism which gripped the country, trying to preserve its national relics in shrines of stone and paper. Individual efforts were subsumed in the Society of Antiquaries, which laid the foundations of what was to be the Royal Scottish Museum, while James Johnson began collecting pieces into *The Scots Musical Museum*, whose editorship was then taken over by Robert Burns.

Burns was especially well aware of the fact that one cannot keep a heritage alive by merely pickling specimens of a living tradition in printer's ink, and his answer was to take frequent liberties with lyrics, while insisting on a faithful rendering of time-honoured melodies. The result is an authoritative publication which paradoxically subverts such claims to authority as are based on antiquity. The inherent chronological confusion goes hand in hand with confusion between genres and levels of class or culture:

much Scottish art-song was in a folk or even a broadside tradition, and the fashion of writing new words, Scots or English, to old tunes—a *genre* sometimes called 'national song'—inevitably blurred the differences. (Crawford 1979: 8)

As it would now appear, the most prominent long-term products of such levelling have, ironically enough, been dehistoricised icons of the shortbread-tin variety. Since what by now seems time immemorial, an

ahistorical Burns has been feted in exactly the same manner at annual Burns Nights, being an endless series of birthday parties at which Burns does not get any older, with a clientele that is not infrequently as exclusive as its jactitations of classlessness are audible. These occasions show Scottish mass culture's repetition of a timeless ritual and the contemplation of timeless tableaux divorced from their historical origins, and thus as remote as possible from "the blood-boltered immediacy of Scottish history in the raw" (Reid-Baxter 2002: 83) which Scottish art is indeed capable of recreating.

Such recreation lies at the heart of Scottish historical fiction, as pioneered by Walter Scott in his Waverley novels 1814 ff. Here too, however, the conjuring up of the past is essentially a distancing: as I have argued elsewhere, Scott was engaged in an act of "novelistic exorcism," (Malzahn 1996: 12) raising the spectre of history only to lay it to rest for good. Scott's fictional Scotland is a more glamorous and more exciting place than the one he saw himself in, but at the same time a more lawless and more frightening one that neither should nor could be substituted for the new and enduring North Britain.

Speaking with post-mortem foreknowledge of the inexorable and irreversible passing of heroic-barbaric society, Scott gave the past the aura of a "necessity *per accidens*," and the ensuing state of civilisation that of a paradoxical, because once again ahistorical, "necessity *per se*." (Zagzebski 1991: 15) The success of the operation was enormous, and its continuation in the Victorian age ensured. In total, Scott's conscious contribution to his country's dehistoricised historical iconography would thus appear much more voluntary and comprehensive than Burns's: the shortbread tin designers are surely indebted to none more than to Scott, as the man who responded to Scotland's disappearance from the political map of Europe by firmly implanting it on its imaginative map, as "a country of the mind and of the past." (Power 1935: 144)

What I have described so far concerns some of the more obvious manifestations of Scotland's peculiar position inside and outside historical time. Hardly less interesting are other kinds of writing which are maybe a little less evidently connected to a specific kind of time-perception, although it makes eminent sense to put them in the very same paradigm. Above all, there is what I may perhaps for convenience' sake call the Jekyll-and-Hyde type, though its roots go back far beyond Robert Louis Stevenson's eponymous story of 1886, and even beyond James Hogg's 1824 novel *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. The main psychological motifs entail disruptions of chronology as much as of

identity, and they can finally be traced back to the 18th century, from which time onwards in Scottish literature

multiplicity of voice, fragmentation of personality, and the projection of self-images recur with a frequency and an intensity that are quite remarkable. (Simpson 1988: 2)

From the discontinuity brought on by a double life to the simultaneous presence of competing narratives, Scottish literature is still to this day full of cyclic patterns, disruptions and inversions of chronology, and other anomalies, as further seen in what I may once again be allowed to evoke by means of a handy label, namely, the Peter Pan tradition. James Barrie's eponymous 1904 play showed a timeless Never Land which houses the dropouts of history; its success made the story and the character itself timeless, although or perhaps because of being "a play which was not a play; in a genre not yet defined or understood." (Jack 1991: 157) In the framework of the present discussion, the Scottishness of the tale should clearly seem as crucial as it is unobtrusive; the embodiment of an ever-present and ever-youthful past as a territory to which one can escape from the realm of history could, for example, very well be read in reference to the role of a dehistoricised Scotland in the Union.

From *Peter Pan*, however, I am now going to make a giant leap forward to a piece of contemporary Scottish writing, as documenting the persistence of certain disturbances and obsessions with escape and return, past and future, fragmentation and alienation, stagnation and discontinuity. The novel I have chosen to talk about in detail is *Porno* by Irvine Welsh, 2002 sequel to the 1993 success *Trainspotting*, and thus in itself indicative of a problematical coherence: even before considering the content, the reader is likely to see the nine years between the two publications as signalling a return rather than a continuation. 'Return' must undoubtedly be a key word in any description of the book, whose plot brings the *Trainspotting* protagonists Mark 'Rents' Renton and Simon 'Sick Boy' Williamson back to Edinburgh's port of Leith, from whose parochial and drug-ridden underachievers they had temporarily distanced themselves by moving to Amsterdam and to London respectively.

In a sense, *Porno* confirms those interpretations of *Trainspotting* which see in the ties between its characters "a fatality from which there is no escape" (Craig 1999: 55) or which put a qualification on the end of the plot, as in the comment that when Rents absconds with the communal loot from a drug deal, he manages "to get clear—as clear as he can ever get"

(Gifford et al.: 886). Rents' feeling that he "could now never go back to Leith, to Edinburgh, even to Scotland, ever again" (Welsh 1993: 344) asks to be taken in the manner of an inverse typological reading: the pattern of contemplated and attempted flight and pursuit must continue with return or capture and renewed escape, echoing over and over again like the "everlasting farewells" (De Quincey 1821: 53) of a drug addict's nightmare. Like Huckleberry Finn, Renton is a fugitive who is not away to stay away or "no awa tae bide awa", as a popular Scottish song has it, and he will not be able to forget auld acquaintance either.

It is certainly no coincidence that Renton the would-be fatedodger then appears in a second book, just as Twain's Huck Finn, present already in *Tom Sawyer*, resurfaced in narratives penned subsequently to his own *Adventures*; or as Peter Pan, present in nuce in the 1902 *Tommy and Grizel* and even earlier tales, turned up again in the 1906 *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, and in the 1911 *Peter and Wendy*. There is an added similarity in the one nemesis which haunts all three protagonists: adulthood, civilisation, conformity to bourgeois values and lifestyle. The extreme lifestyle alternative, however, is in each case incarnate in another nemesis: Huck's father, Captain Hook, and Frank Begbie respectively. Their existence shows that the escape from the frying pan can only be the jump into the fire, and vice versa.

Seen in relation to *Trainspotting*, the sequel *Porno* is thus basically a recycling of the cyclic plot scheme, in spite of once again an apparently successful welsher by Renton at the end. This time, though, the final frame focuses on two of those who have remained behind to wait for him: Sick Boy and Begbie, the narcissistic manipulating scammer and the moronic macho superthug who together represent a good deal of the vices from whose grip one should well want to extricate oneself, but for which one may yet harbour a repressed longing. Renton's atavistic yearning back rises to the surface when Begbie, crossing the road with murder on what it might be a euphemism to call his mind, is run over by a car. The potential victim to Begbie then becomes a victim to his own nostalgia:

I'm over there without consciously knowing what the fuck I'm doing. I'm down at his side, supporting his head, watching his busy eyes blaze and jive, brimming with baffled malevolence. I don't want him like this. I want him punching me, kicking me. (Welsh 2002: 470)

What rises to the surface here is an unconscious backward fixation that mocks Rents' facade of success and security as well as Sick Boy's future-orientated, entrepreneurial self-definition; or in the language of utilitarian

psychology, Sick Boy's task time perspective and Renton's temporal time perspective:

The former emphasizes the implications for immediate achievement-related behaviour of the quality and number of anticipated future goals, while the latter emphasizes the individual's temporal distance from the attainment or lack of attainment of achievement-related goals. (Pearlson, 1982: 131)

If the application of such terms seems slightly tongue-in-cheek here, this is perhaps no more than a fitting echo of the book's self-mockery. This extends to its internal chronology, which is severely undercut not only by the kaleidoscopic shifting of narrators and settings, but also by details which subvert the apparently clear-cut anchoring of narrated time within history. One telling incident suggests the skin-deep nature of the characters' historical consciousness: the year of the Battle of the Boyne 1690 is tattooed on a Ranger's supporter's arm as a memento of his Royal Bank of Scotland PIN code, unmasking the dehistoricised status of yet another Scottish icon. The tattooed Dode's previous tirade about Protestant work ethic turns out to be as devoid of substance as Sick Boy's occasional insistence on his Italian roots and his allegiance to Hibernian green: empty gesture and faded emotion, which left behind only its negative counterpart: "I don't really care that much about Hibs these days, but my distaste of Hearts never wanes for a second" (Welsh 2002: 123). The positive content has gone out of the icons; all that remains in Sick Boy's case is occasional lip-service to the cherished self-image of the "wild Caledonian-Italiano laddie" (Welsh 2002: 135) who, Huck-like, resists especially female attempts at domestication and civilisation. Extending the view from Sick Boy to the other characters at the novel's centre, the reader sees history collapsed, together with religion and class, in the cyclic repetition of various kinds of substance abuse, bearing out the arch-addict Spud's Janus-faced metaphoric statement which blends the jargons of football and intoxication in the one phrase, "the Junk Cup kin be a great leveller" (Welsh 2002: 74).

Unlike in *Trainspotting*, Spud is foregrounded among the multiple choices of authorial personae in *Porno* because of his attempt to write a book. The history of Leith which he actually manages to research and compile in manuscript form hinges on the only other historical sea mark in the novel, 1920, the year when Edinburgh's *Anschluss* of Leith met more vociferous opposition than the one which the German term designated in the 1930s. "That's when aw the problems pure started, man!" (Welsh 2002: 185) says Spud consequently, and thus piles a local

chip on one that's already on the national shoulder. 1707 and 1920 together form an icon whose significance may well be elucidated by borrowing from postcolonial theory; its context is an inferiorisation process that mirrors the "sustained belittling of the colonised culture" (Beveridge and Turnbull 1989: 5) with an anachronistic defeatism:

Yip, ah'm jist no a gadge cut oot fir modern life n that's aw thir is tae it, man. Sometimes the gig goes smooth, then ah jist pure panic n it's back tae the auld weys. What kin ah dae? (Welsh 2002: 63)

Spud's writing is part of just such a futile attempt to rebuild his life and revive his relationship with his wife Alison; predictably enough, it fails to achieve the desired effect on the publisher as well as on the spouse. He likewise fails in an attempt to end his life by inciting Begbie to kill him and letting Alison pocket the insurance money: he must thus go on leading a shadowy existence without hope of either change or death, a condition that is clearly not dissimilar to the state of the nation as described above.

Still, Welsh himself seems to have done and fared quite differently out of the same background and material. Part of the explanation or, to slip an appropriate confusion of chronology into the argument, part of the consequence may be that he has been able to talk from a distance which is by now also geographical: "He lives in London," is the laconic comment under the author's photograph at the end of *Porno*, while my 1994 *Trainspotting* edition still defiantly proclaims that he "works, rests and raves in Edinburgh." Significantly, the picture in *Porno* has altered from that of a frighteningly permanent hell to that of a doomed one whose vanishing is regarded with a sense of regret. Welsh's perspective on the Leithers in *Porno* has come to resemble Scott's take on the Highlanders in *Waverley*: a picturesque but doomed race whose traditional habitat is about to be bulldozed by the modern developers.

What we have here can thus well be described as a meeting of Scott's dehistoricising with Stevenson's fragmentation and Barrie's regressionism. This might not in itself make *Porno* representative of contemporary Scottish literature, but it certainly suffices to label the book as symptomatic of Scottish culture's condition, and "if it is true that time is never simply lived but evaluated, i.e. symbolized and interpreted," (Ricoeur 1977: 21) then we would need to come to the conclusion that in spite of changed political bearings, at least part of Scottish time-perception still stands still where it did.

Today as before, Scottish literature draws not only its most distinctive characteristics, but in them arguably also its most recognisable strengths, from the main obsessions to which it keeps returning. The most typically Scottish and the artistically most successful Scottish literature is still talking in what is fairly well described as a Gothic mode, a fairly wide range of forms that are essentially “about breakdown, about terror, about the collapse of territory, structure, order, authority,” (Bissett 2001: 5) and one might add, about the collapse of chronology, too. Today as before, some Scottish writers also still flee the margin for what they see as the centre, escaping to where they think it all happens from a place where they know it does not, a place on whose constraints they then look back with a combined longing and loathing that matches the combined loathing and lenience shown by some of those who stay.

To mention just a couple of other contemporary writers' names, Robin Jenkins may serve as an example of the latter kind, who are perhaps altogether more numerous than either the escapees or the radical likes of Alasdair Gray, a man as intent on dragging Scotland's culture back into the historical arena as Hugh MacDiarmid was in his day. In an attempt at categorisation, however, one should not forget that in Scottish literature, indictment and indulgence, exhortation and exculpation are often intermingled, and that the artistic potential of a certain time-perception does not necessarily equate its practical benefits. Consider the following comment on the ancient Greeks:

Time for the Greeks not only was essentially past, it was also destructive. It did not create; it tore down. Professor Niebuhr regards this as a subordinate theme in Greek thought, but it is in some ways a corollary of the cyclical idea—at least psychologically, for the cyclical view is ultimately pessimistic. (Driver 1967: 29)

One might be tempted to voice at least a partial disagreement, for especially in the absence of a generally accepted religious or ideological teleology, stasis or cyclical motion may offer refuge in a kailyardish sense of parochial security, or in a Gothic sense of nightmarish perpetuity. Sooner or later, however, the creative potentials of both are bound to have played themselves out, and change must come back in with a vengeance. A wraithlike nation that remains outside the historical process may pretend to survive forever in unchanging images, while those who actively and consciously participate in history must by the same token also contemplate their definitive exit: neither an individual nor a nation can fully live in time without accepting the finite nature of its existence.

A national literature in post-Devolution Scotland should thus reflect at least a hint of the nation's dissolution: behind or beside the present fashionable decadence which is exemplified by the novel I analysed here, there should be at least a taste of something different, fresher or better. If this expectation sounds too much like the straitjacket of socialist realism, consider the logical consequence of the dialectic view of history, namely, that even a blatantly teleological theory such as Marxism is bound to incorporate a cyclical element, inasmuch as utopian communism is conceived of as the return of primitive communism on a higher level. Beside or instead of elements of utopian vision in a predominantly dystopian Scottish literature, we might thus look out for other means of transcending its historically induced limitations, such as for instance

that particular experience of a suspended moment of time, a "great present" that focuses all our attention and seems to hang motionless before us ... so that we experience again, as it were, the eternal present of primitive society. (Lynch 1972: 177)

This is an effect which could be classed under the general heading of epiphany, but which is nonetheless generally taken to have a specific affinity with poetry. For this reason, I shall devote the final section of this paper to citing a few examples from the work of the poet Edwin Muir, who seems to make a particularly good case in point for the claim that Scotland's poetic imagination manifests the very same obsessive concerns and patterns of thought or expression as Scotland's fiction, and that many, if not all of these concerns, can in be seen as in some way related to issues of time-perception or time-consciousness.

In Muir's poems, a fundamentally Romantic time-perception blends with a specifically Scottish one. Literature is, as in the 1937 poem "The Stationary Journey", at least a potential means of transcending time by finding "the mind's eternity" in art as "Imagination's one long day," (Muir 1991: 66) recreating that lost timelessness of childhood which is evoked in the 1934 "Variations on a Time Theme":

A child in Adam's field I dreamed away
My one eternity and hourless day,
Ere from my wrist Time's bird had learned to fly,
Or I had robbed the Tree of which I die (Muir 1991: 53)

The last of the four lines quoted here, however, transforms the familiar Wordsworthian topos into something grimmer, something perhaps more akin to a product of one of Byron's darker moods. We might well want to

remember Byron's Scottish background when we hear his dramatic hero Manfred claim "In life there is no present," and watch him drag out a Spud-like shadow-existence dominated by guilt and nausea. "Nothing is less than the present moment" seems to be the psychological insight that the author Byron anticipates here: if the present is "*what is being made*," (Bergson 1896: 150) then the perceived loss of it surely stems from the subject's unwillingness or inability to keep on making it. Still, Manfred in his rocky limbo between an abhorred life and a dreaded death can at least look at the eventual certainty and finality of the latter, while Muir in his "Variations on a Time Theme" appears to go one step further, in suggesting that not even death is a way out from temporality:

Imprisonment's for ever; we're the mock of Time,
While lost and empty lies Eternity. (Muir 1991: 58)

The bleak and radical nature of Muir's metaphysical vision corresponds to the radical nature of his views on a hiatus between Scotland's present and past, a topic dealt with in the critical prose of his 1936 treatise *Scott and Scotland* as well as obliquely in earlier, and more directly in later poetry. Muir's 1956 poem "Scotland's Winter" envisages his contemporaries as figures who show their disrespect for history by tripping lightly and unknowingly over the graves of their former leaders and artists. They are a people unaware of their roots or their destiny, and thus likewise ignorant of the source of their predicament: their lack of perception leads them to a complacent acquiescence in the "poor frozen life and shallow banishment" (Muir 1991: 214) which traps them in a winter of discomfort, but of no resulting discontent.

This critique echoes the sentiment of "Scotland 1941", which had branded Burns and Scott "sham bards of a sham nation," but then virtually absolved the two writers by identifying different culprits for the divorce of Scotland's people from their heritage: the names Knox, Melville and Peden stand for fiery Reformation preachers and their Covenanting successors in the 17th century, creating a cultural "desolation" that would leave future generations with no other kind of pride but "pride of pelf" (Muir 1991: 100).

Such a *Casablanca*-like rounding up of John Knox and Co. as the usual suspects is by now as much of a commonplace in Scotland's cultural debate as is its pro-Knoxian refutation, but Muir caps the raising of the issue with the hardly refutable hint that to 20th-century Scotland as a whole, the icons used in this very debate may have lost their meaning. Muir's treading on sectarian toes is thus perfunctory: his target is not a

fraction, but the vast majority of a population who now inhabit an unreal place, "a painted field," (Muir 1991: 100) on which they show a mere simulacrum of that perverse bravery which once made and then unmade their unity.

In a by now clearly necessary attempt to put an end to the cyclical returns of my argument to recurrent phenomena, I may at this stage perhaps get away with the unsubstantiated observation that Muir's late poetry holds much which fits into a cyclical pattern, and with the unscrutinised mention of the verdict that his mature poems "contains a European sensibility" (Knight 1980: 8). I in turn would like to claim that although Muir stands for linguistic and aesthetic choices that put his poetry outside the mainstream of Scotland's 20th-century literary renaissance, he was very much in unison with it with regard to the concerns and obsessions I have focused on.

In the course of the 21st century, Scottish literature can hardly be expected to discard these concerns and obsessions altogether, but neither can it be expected to adhere to all the old formulas, for not only the political but also the demographic changes will dictate corresponding changes in the perception of self in space and time. How artistically fruitful these changes will be, time itself will tell: neither a liberation from external constraints nor one from intrinsic compulsions is in itself a recipe for success. Perhaps a time will come when Scotland looks nostalgically at its post-1707 or even at its post-Reformation nostalgia as having been its most creative mood, and when the country wishes for another 1707-like time-warp to stop the ticking of the historical clock before all Macdonalds have turned into burgers and all Macadams gone nuts.

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