

Editorial: Russian/Modernist Connections

While our previous issue focused on Scottish-Caribbean literary and historical exchanges, this edition of *IJSL* looks broadly towards Russia for a range of literary borrowings and rhetorical affiliations.

Critical links with Russia, the work of Bakhtin in particular, have of course preoccupied much Scottish literary criticism since the late 1980s.^[1] In literary terms, the inter-war renaissance period sees a large number of Scottish writers fascinated by the Soviet experiment, viewed as an engine of cultural as well as political change. Margery Palmer McCulloch's sourcebook for this period documents the range of models Scottish writers were exploring, including MacDiarmid's 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea' (drawing on Dostoyevsky's 'Russian Idea'), and extracts from Naomi Mitchison's 'A Socialist Plan for Scotland' (1932), with its revolutionary speculations on national territory: 'the main industrial belt, including Glasgow, could quite well be separated from the rest, becoming culturally united, perhaps, to some extent at least, with the industrial Midland belt of England'. For Mitchison, re-orienting ourselves to a future 'Scotland in the Socialist world' means imagining the nation 'above all, as a new experiment'.^[2] As Catherine Kerrigan points out, revolutionary Russia was central to MacDiarmid's vision of cultural as well as economic progress:

Between his own Scottish traditions and those of Russia he felt great psychological affinities, so that at a time when Russian literature and art were astounding the world with their innovativeness and great technical expertise, MacDiarmid happily looked to Russia as a model of cultural regeneration. MacDiarmid recognised that the great surge of creativity which had erupted in Russia had stemmed from the discovery of Russian artists of their Slavophile roots. He saw that this investigation of their own culture was no simple-minded retreat into the past, but was a means of rediscovering identity. In their fusion of traditions from the folk imagination and the new aesthetic Vitalism of their day, Russian artists had led the world into a new era of art.^[3]

In the contemporary period, it is perhaps the poetry, translations and criticism of Edwin Morgan from the early 1960s that spring to mind most readily when considering Russian-Scottish comparative links.

The debates of this issue do not, however, concern the well-trodden ground of Bakhtin, Hymns to Lenin or Futurist verse. Instead we have four articles which tease out a variety of more elusive Russian and modernist presences in the work of some major twentieth-century Scottish writers.

Dougal McNeill's article reads *Trainspotting* against the grain of its immediacy and directness, and relates the 'shock tactics' of the novel to a less obvious political subtext. *Trainspotting's* curiously discursive commentaries on Leftist politics signal a parodic intention at odds with its cruder narrative manipulations, which ultimately undermines both. Identifying a significant (and, we believe, hitherto unremarked) allusion to the writing of Trotsky, McNeill reveals a political and narrative ambiguity in the novel's rubbishing of socialist idealism. This 'grim parody of Trotsky', at once blatant and extremely subtle, 'manipulate[s] a political shock effect that the rest of *Trainspotting* cannot produce', falsifying its critique of the socialist tradition and foreshadowing the empty, mannered rhetorical violence of Welsh's later fiction.

Highly specific cultural borrowings are similarly explored in Michael Whitworth's essay on MacDiarmid's 'Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa'. MacDiarmid's position in the 'mass culture' debates of the 1930s provide the context for a detailed untangling of the poem's cinematic, theatrical and philosophical sources. MacDiarmid's heavy reliance on second-hand knowledge and 'the interpreting class' is read as deepening, rather than compromising, his critique of middlebrow cultural journalism which 'predigest[s] the experiences of cinema, theatre, and dance'. Much more than a patchwork of quotations, 'the poem works to dismantle criticism as a form' and recruits its moments of imaginative intensity for a compositional process which preserves 'the alterity of the creative work'.

Laurence Nicoll's essay proposes a loose affiliation between nineteenth-century Russian fiction (Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Lermontov, Turgenev and Chekhov) and twentieth-century writers such as Alexander Trocchi, William McIlvanney and James Kelman. Central to this comparative approach is the notion of chance, openness and possibility, and a principled hostility to the 'terrorism' of totalising nationalist contextualism. The 'possible futures' of the existential novel are personal and situational, not national-historic, and cannot easily be reconciled with a metanarrative of national development (experimental or otherwise).

Andrew Sneddon returns us to Scottish/British politics in the modernist period. His article is concerned with claims to an 'insider' perspective on Highland landscape, focusing particularly on Neil Gunn's position in the 'Hydro debates' of the 1930s and 40s. Examining a colourful parliamentary discourse shaped as much by sentimental Balmorality as the industrial modernism of the Tennessee Valley Authority, Sneddon locates a tension between aesthetic and economic valuations of land evidenced by the shifting valence of the term 'amenity', and alienating versus restorative imagery of technological change.

Following on from Nicoll's call for 'large context' criticism, Stuart Kelly's review essay highlights a 'weird rash' of recent academic publishing on Scottish literature, and explores its strengths as well as its signal omissions. Kelly questions the role of academic criticism in the crystallisation (and self-serving affirmation) of a contemporary Scottish canon, and asserts the need for trans-cultural comparisons as a way of sidestepping the 'how tartan is my text' conundrum – 'the notion that the primary function of studying Scottish literature is to discover its vexed, propagandist or ulterior relationship to the constitutional settlement and political conditions of Scotland'. He writes 'comparative criticism might well be the way for Scottish literature to engage fully with its status as literature, rather than its carapace of Scottishness.'

It is hoped that the articles in this issue also build upon that notion.

NOTES

[1] Notable texts including Peter McCarey's *Hugh MacDiarmid and the Russians* (1987) and Alistair Renfrew's *Exploiting Bakhtin* (1997), with many other contributions by critics including Roderick Watson, Robert Crawford, David Morris and Carol McQuirk

[2] Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2004), pp. 339-40.

[3] Catherine Kerrigan, *Whaur Extremes Meet: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid 1920-1934* (Edinburgh: The Mercat Press, 1983), p. 3