

Editorial: Russian/Modernist Connections

While our previous issue focused on Scottish-Caribbean literary and historical exchanges, this edition of *IJS*L 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

Is Life Beautiful?

Narrative Uncertainty and 'Literary anti-Trotskyism' in *Trainspotting*

Dougal McNeill

You always mix in some little phrase that is not your own,

And that disturbs because of the recollection it prompts!

Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments^[1]

For all its shocks and provocations, *Trainspotting* employs a remarkably straightforward and direct style of narration. There is plenty that is difficult for the reader, to be sure, and plenty of material incorporated that is explored only rarely in most contemporary fiction, but the manner of Welsh's presentation is, at this stage in his career at least, characterised by a sort of 'up-frontness' and immediacy that serves to reinforce a sense of his work's moral seriousness and of the importance of his representational project. His narrative raw material, whether disgusting yet disgustingly plausible (all that ferreting around in the unflushed toilet Renton does early on) or moving, sympathetically portrayed and disturbing (Dawn's sudden and unexplained death) is represented in a broadly realist manner: the horror, particularly when the reader learns of Dawn's death, is that we know quite precisely what is going on. Narrative uncertainty, writerly tricks, tension and so on: these modernist or detective fiction stock-in-trade devices are noticeably absent at this stage in Welsh's work, and it is their absence that gives us a sense, when reading *Trainspotting*, of authorial solidarity with his characters, an evident sympathy and bond. Against conservative critics' claims that the novel is using the details of addiction and drug abuse for sensationalist ends, Welsh's matter-of-fact presentation indicates instead the presence of genuine engagement and attention.

It is all the more difficult to cope, then, when the reader reaches this part of the 'Bad Blood' section:

— Basically this. I produced the first photo. It showed Kevin, bound to a kitchen chair. His head hung heavily to one side, and his eyes were closed. Had Venters looked at the detail, he may have noticed a bluish tint to his son's eyelids and lips, and the almost clownish whiteness of his complexion. It's almost certain that all Venters noticed were the dark wounds on his head, chest and knees, and the blood which oozed from them, covering his body, at first making it hard to know that he was naked.[\[2\]](#)

What follows is worse and, for a few minutes, the reader believes Dave Mitchell has tortured, raped and murdered a small boy. We later discover the murder has been staged — as part of an elaborately planned revenge fantasy of a kind that will re-appear later in Welsh's work[\[3\]](#) — but, for the moments one is reading, Welsh goes to great lengths to convince us the torture is a real narrative event. Mitchell tells us that 'afterwards I felt terrible...Bad as I felt then, it was only a foretaste of the horror that hit me when I developed the photographs...I shook with fear and remorse' (253). His is a cruelly detailed description, and my first reading of *Trainspotting* almost stopped with it. The excessive horribleness of it all, the images of a child hurt and made to suffer — images that stay in the mind even after one learns that they don't relate to the 'real world' of the novel — seemed so out of place with the tenor and register of the rest of the book that it was difficult to keep reading. Mitchell's narrative stands out not only for its use of suspense and uncertainty. It is also narrated differently from the rest of the novel, using far more 'standard' English. 'Bad Blood' seems to stand alone, but also to point towards something in the rest of the text: it has little to do with the plot of the novel, such as it is, but appearing just over half-way through the text, at the same time suggests a centrality or significance to its own sub-plot.

What are we to make of all this? The *nastiness* of Mitchell's narrative has stuck with me in a way that some of Welsh's other provocations have not and, after reading the novel many times, it is still that part of the text that makes me flinch, and hurry to turn the page. Welsh has outlined justifications for his use of shock tactics elsewhere, but these later developments are not my current focus.[\[4\]](#) I want to suggest here that the excessiveness of 'Bad Blood', its uncharacteristic use of narrative uncertainty and its subject matter, perform political functions. Their political function helps explain what might otherwise seem incongruous about the passage and also, I will argue here, helps explain the aesthetic failure of 'Bad Blood', its bad faith. 'Bad Blood' is, to my mind at least, the only section of *Trainspotting* that is unambiguously exploitative. The reason for this exploitativeness is Welsh's attempt, through Mitchell's narration, to substitute emotional for intellectual negation. What seems, on a first reading, so out of place about 'Bad Blood' — its narrative style; the use of 'standard' English; the deployment of narrative uncertainty; the subject matter itself — can be explained when placed by a reading that pays attention to the political

allusion the passage builds towards. 'Bad Blood' ends with a parody of Leon Trotsky's 'Testament', one of the key texts in the tradition of revolutionary socialism. Welsh has engaged in fitful polemics against the revolutionary tradition across the range of his writing: what makes 'Bad Blood' unique, and, I argue here, unsuccessful, is the way this polemical negation is carried out via literary allusion and narrative device.

To claim that *Trainspotting* makes an allusion to Trotsky might at first seem merely fanciful. Although it is a critical commonplace to refer to Welsh's writing in relation to working-class politics, socialism and the contradictions of so-called 'post-industrial' society, no critic, to my knowledge, has explored the political allusions at work in Welsh's first novel. Certainly neither of Robert Morace's two very useful books - *Trainspotting: a Readers' Guide* and *Irvine Welsh* - contain any references to Trotsky. But Welsh's work displays a detailed awareness of the specific trends within socialist thought and working-class politics, and examining how this awareness plays itself out can enhance our understanding of *Trainspotting*. Hearing the allusion to Trotsky in 'Bad Blood' enables the reader to come to terms with that section's out-of-place status within the novel, and suggests some reasons for later developments in Welsh's writing career. Robert Morace has noted how 'Welsh has been forced to up the violence and vulgarity quotient with each [new] work,' and suggests his work's incorporation into the mainstream of fiction as a possible reason for this.^[5] The first appearance of this sort of material, though, carries with it very specific political baggage and, if the violence Welsh introduces into his narrative is a form of displacement, its increasing ferocity and regularity in later work may gesture back to this initial moment.

Trainspotting carries out an attack on two traditions in leftist thought, social democracy and revolutionary socialism. The first is represented and analysed throughout the text. The second is evoked and attacked through allusion, and it is this evocation that Mitchell's narration denigrates by proxy. By paying attention to stray words and phrases, and by examining a key political allusion commentators have thus far ignored, this essay seeks to explain the political purpose of 'Bad Blood's' narrative uncertainty, and to link it to what I will call Welsh's 'literary anti-Trotskyism.'^[6]

Trainspotting's Politics / Politics Out of Trainspotting

Suggesting a politics for Welsh or *Trainspotting* is, of course, a notoriously difficult and contested exercise. *Trainspotting*, as Michael Gardiner puts it, 'either borrows from Thatcherite opportunism or critiques it, depending on whose account you read,' and the text has proven enormously productive of wildly varying and contradictory accounts.^[7] Academic accounts of Welsh and

politics have divided into two main groupings, those who suggest a politics that can be produced *out of* the text, and those that consider the politics of *Trainspotting* itself.

Accounts of the politics that can be produced out of a reading of *Trainspotting* focus on its formal aspects, and their impact on potential readers. For Jeffrey Karnicky, 'the political power of Welsh's fiction lies not just in...representations but also in the creative potentials that the novels engender.' *Trainspotting*, for Karnicky, can 'provide a way of rethinking traditional notions of selfhood and its place in the world...[and suggest] new ways of living in the world.'^[8] Karnicky's reading is suggestive, and carefully documented, but, when he argues that 'Welsh should not be read as providing case studies that point toward what has gone wrong with the world'^[9] he keeps his argument at a needlessly high level of abstraction.^[10] There are, as I shall show in a moment below, multiple 'case studies' and clear authorial arguments about what 'has gone wrong with the world' at work in *Trainspotting*, some of them very detailed indeed, and any account of the novel that aims to incorporate it into another political project needs to come to terms with them. It is the very specificity of Welsh's fictional situations that demands from us a criticism that is at once *Scottish* and *international*. Just as the novel offers detailed studies of particular Scottish settings and particular Scottish situations — almost a surfeit of detail in its reconstruction of sectarianism, class geography, work patterns, social habits — as well as locating them within an international set of concerns — de-industrialisation, working-class political tradition, the future of socialism — so too criticism needs to find a way, not of separating, but of integrating these twin sets of concerns. Welsh's work explores political and ethical questions of urgency and relevance beyond their immediate setting, one explanation, no doubt, for *Trainspotting's* extraordinary international success. At the same time, of course, it is a very detailed and precise depiction of a very specifically Scottish situation and dilemma: achieving a reading that explores these aspects of the novel together, and as complementary components of a political analysis, seems the most productive opening.

More richly detailed, and thus more useful, are the attempts to come to terms with the politics internal to *Trainspotting* and its narration, although these attempts are scarcely more unified. Welsh, according to Alan Freeman, performs a useful diagnostic and social role: 'focussing on social margins not only affirms their inhabitants but also illuminates the centre against which they are defined and...dramatises the repressive processes of post-industrial individualism.'^[11] Other scholars have narrowed their focus from 'post-industrial' society in general to Scotland in particular, with Drew Milne calling Welsh's writing 'an acute portrait of the political confusions of Scottish self-representation.'^[12] Alan Riach takes a more positive approach, claiming that 'at the heart of *Trainspotting* is the explanation of a defensive national strategy.'^[13] But this approach is at once too broad and too narrow. That Riach's idea of a 'defensive national strategy' is too broad

a description is obvious in one basic sense: Scotland is a class-divided society like any other, and one doubts that the Duke of Buccleuch recognises his own strategies, whether defensive or otherwise, in Renton's and Spud's struggles with repressive welfare agencies and courts.

If a focus on *Trainspotting's* contribution to Scottish national strategies is too broad, though, it is at the same time too narrow in another way. Welsh himself has commented on how 'these tedious nationalistic issues that every Scottish writer is supposed to engage with are so limiting.'^[14] When the nation is taken as the limit of the political, then it becomes not only limiting but also distorting as an analytic frame. Drew Milne claims that '*Trainspotting* folds over the incipient politicisation of the narrative voice into a series of localised expressions of inarticulate hostility to politics as such.' He quotes this passage from the novel:

Ah've never felt British, because ah'm not. It's ugly and artificial. Ah've never really felt Scottish either, though. Scotland the brave, ma erse; Scotland the shitein cunt. We'd throttle the life oot ay each other fir the privilege ay rimmin some English aristocrat's piles. Ah've never felt a fuckin thing aboot countries, other than total disgust. (228)

Milne goes on to call this 'characteristic of the reductive affirmation of apolitical cynicism that marks the limit of Welsh's supposed radicalism.'^[15] The passage is apolitical, though, only if we accept the nation and national identity as the horizon and limit for Scottish political thought. It's hard to see how describing Britishness as 'artificial' is any more or less apolitical than unthinkingly accepting it as natural. There may well be a healthy and vibrant internationalism in never having 'felt a fuckin thing aboot countries, other than total disgust' or, indeed, Welsh's political interests may lie elsewhere. Riach and Milne, for all the differences in politics and focus in their analyses, share a narrowly defined national frame, preventing them from exploring other political possibilities. Michael Gardiner is closer to identifying the dual Scottish and internationalist range of *Trainspotting's* ambitions when he writes that the novel's key themes are 'sectarianism, Enlightenment and colonialism.'^[16] Gardiner's own work is a sensitive exploration of these aspects of Welsh's work. What needs added to his list is *Trainspotting's* assault on the traditions of social democracy (in the Scottish context, Labourism) and revolutionary socialism as the novel seeks 'tae go beyond our personal junk circumstances; in a brilliant metaphor for our times' (11).

Leith as Spectacle

Welsh's case against the twin traditions in the labour movement, although neglected by most academic criticism, has been hiding in plain sight. 'So many of the institutions,' he argues, 'by

which our morals were moulded in the past no longer are relevant...the old institutions by which the working class defined itself — socialism, trade unionism and so on — are no longer tenable means through which the working class can define itself.^[17] This focus has perhaps eluded academic criticism because it draws on a different critical vocabulary and set of thinkers than those most academic critics are familiar with. So Robert Morace writes of *Trainspotting* oscillating 'between Nietzschean resentment and Bakhtinian drowning of all forms of monologic authority and tradition,' an insight useful in its way, but quite out of tune with the other allusions to other political thinkers and traditions infusing the book.^[18] Welsh draws on many traditions and currents of thought, from existentialism to Nietzsche to the theories informing revolutionary politics. An internationalist critical focus becomes all the more important in this situation. In the same way that one needs to listen and look outside of Scotland and away from literary studies to draw on all the traditions informing *Trainspotting's* aesthetic — where Morrissey matters more than MacDiarmid, and Bowie more than Burns — the political traditions the novel engages with are ones that are, for the most part, outside of the world of academic criticism.

The clues to this engagement hover in the stray details of Welsh's prose style, in incongruous word choices or unusual phrasing he allows particular characters. In his short story 'The Granton Star Cause' Welsh has a policeman snarl 'ah don't want any lumpen-proletarian malcontents threatening ma investments.'^[19] In 'A Smart Cunt' one character asks about 'that goth burd...oan some sortay Stalinist trip?'^[20] 'Ma investments' are a familiar Thatcherite shareholder-democracy and individualist refrain; what makes the sentence jar, however, is the policeman's use of the term 'lumpen-proletarian', a specifically Marxist term. Similarly 'goth burd' is familiar young-man's sexism: 'Stalinist' is a very specific sort of terminology, and one usually limited to Trotskyist or anti-Stalinist leftists, whereas most 'everyday' speech makes no distinction between Communist and Stalinist. *Trainspotting's* narrators speak with a similar, strangely precise socialist inflection, with jargon interrupting at odd moments: 'Football divisions were a stupid and irrelevant nonsense, acting against the interest of working-class unity, ensuring that the bourgeoisie's hegemony went unchallenged. Stevie had it all worked out' (48). 'Spud could not be held responsible,' Renton reflects, 'for society's materialism and commodity fetishism' (343). Renton and Stevie's vocabulary should alert us to the way the novel is informed by socialist theory and sub-cultures, particularly the student left. Socialist activity and organisation is common as an aside or background detail across the range of Welsh's work and appears as recently as *The Bedroom Secrets of the Master Chefs*, where Skinner's father was a socialist and Skinner is surprised to encounter revolutionary socialists at an anti-war march in California. There is, of course, nothing unusual or striking about this sort of incidental appearance of socialism in the work of a writer from the land of Gallacher and MacLean. What is distinctive about these stray phrases in Welsh's prose is their incongruity, this mingling of dissident vocabulary into the speech

of characters designed to represent authority and capitalist order. Prose style — some 'little phrase that is not their own' that disturbs with the recollections it prompts — is here part of the way that Welsh advances a particular political argument.

Trainspotting, and Welsh's comments to Ian Peddie about the 'old institutions' being 'no longer tenable' for working-class self-representation, suggest parallels with autonomist critiques of reformist and revolutionary socialism informed by the work of the Situationists and, in particular, Guy Debord. There was, for Debord, nothing but 'impotence and mystification' in the old politics, and, for him

[the proletariat's] own externalised power conspires in the continual reinforcement of capitalist society, no longer merely thanks to the alienation of its labour, but also thanks to the form taken on by the unions, parties and institutions of State power that it had established in pursuit of its own self-emancipation.[\[21\]](#)

Debord links this conspiracy to a theme many critics have responded to in Welsh's work: 'wherever one looks, one encounters this same intent: to *restructure society without community*.'[\[22\]](#) What Welsh positions as the 'new salon of psychic insurrection' in his writing is a partial literary expression of this analysis.[\[23\]](#)

New Labour Nightmares

Reformism appears, in *Trainspotting* and elsewhere across Welsh's *oeuvre*, as at best a deluded nostalgia 'no longer tenable' for self-representation or, at worst, as part of the society of the spectacle, busy maintaining capitalist order. Part of *Trainspotting's* hostility is generational, suggesting that the mythologies of Labourism are inadequate for dealing with the present:

He disnae need to say aboot how he nivir hud they chances growin up in Govan n leavin school at fifteen n takin an apprenticeship. That's implicit. When ye think aboot it though, it isnae that different fae growin up in Leith n leaving school at sixteen n takin an apprenticeship. Especially as he nivir grew up in an era ay mass unemployment. Still, ah'm in nae shape to argue, n even if ah wus, it's pointless wi Weedjies. (191)

Most of the time, though, Welsh's characters are relentless in their critiques, indicting Labourism as at best dated and at worst an ideology of the ruling order. In 'A Smart Cunt', reformist hypocrisy is presented as still somewhat shame-faced and apologetic:

— Listen, Brian, I know you think you're some kind of big radical and I'm some reactionary, fascist pig. Well I've got news for you: I'm a socialist, I'm a union man. I know you just see me as an Establishment figure in a suit, but if the Tories had their way, we'd have kiddies down the mines. I'm every bit as anti-establishment as you, Brian. Yes, I own my own home. Yes, I live in a desirable area. Yes, I'm married and have two children, I take two foreign holidays a year and drive an expensive car. But I'm as anti-establishment as you, Brian. I believe in public services, in putting people first. It's more than just a cliché for me. For me, being anti-establishment is not about dressing like a tramp, taking drugs and going to rave-ups or whatever they're called. That's the easy way out. That's what people that control things want: people opting out, taking the easy route. For me it's about knocking on doors on cold evenings, attending meetings in school halls to get Labour back in and Major and his mob out.

— Yeah...

This guy makes the term asshole redundant.[\[24\]](#)

In 'The Undefeated', a short story in *Ecstasy*, Heather sees her husband Hugh transform from left-wing activist into New Labour apparatchik, a supporter of partially privatising the NHS. His transformation leads her to re-examine her previous attraction to him: 'he was what I thought a rebel was: working class, into student politics...what a lot of fucking nonsense.'[\[25\]](#)

For the narrators of *Trainspotting*, however, even these residual apologetics or ideological differentiations have disappeared, and social democracy is presented as a fully integrated part of the repressive system. Witnessing 'two guys arguing about the poll tax', the division is clear: 'one boy's sussed out, the other's a fuckin spineless Labour/Tory party servile wankboy' (237-38). In fact it was action outside of Parliament — and in opposition to the strategic position advocated by the Parliamentary Labour Party — that led to the defeat of the Poll Tax and to Thatcher's eventual political demise, with events in Scotland playing a particularly important role in this campaign. In refusing to distinguish between the parties, Welsh suggests the real divisions in politics are between these parties and the world outside them. The integration of social democracy into the system has a particular sharpness for those parts of the novel set in Scotland, where the Labour party dominated political life through the 1980s and where a distinctive left Labour tradition was sustained longer than in England. During Spud's job interview he is assured by one of the interviewers that 'I can certainly put your mind at rest with regards to discrimination. That's all covered in our new equal opportunities statement' (66). But, as the interview itself goes on to make clear, snobbishness, discrimination and exploitation still structure class relations. It is

the way this material keeps re-appearing throughout the book, and the way it is incorporated into everything from party conversations to job interviews, that convinces me Karnicky is wrong when he insists that Welsh should 'not be read as providing case studies that point toward what has gone wrong with the world.' After all, as *Trainspotting* was published, and in the years surrounding it, a series of debates were going on around the Left about the nature of the Labour party; the chances for socialists winning political change inside it; the future of reformism in Europe; and the vocabulary of working-class politics after the collapse of Stalinism. Welsh is making a clear intervention into these debates, and an intervention directed against the contemporary salience of social democracy:

The socialists go on about your comrades, your class, your union, and society.
Fuck all that shite. The Tories go on about your employer, your country, your family. Fuck that even mair. (30)

Social democracy, Labour politics, has been removed as an oppositional force needing to be considered. Welsh himself has claimed that ours is a 'post-democratic' age where voting in reality TV shows carries more weight than voting in parliamentary elections, something he no longer does.^[26] Sick Boy's scorn for Conservative ideology ('fuck that even mair') has some resemblance to his author's position on the health of liberal democracy, but more significant for my purposes here is what has been left out. British politics was, especially in *Trainspotting's* pre-Devolution setting, essentially a two-party affair, and one would normally expect the opposition to be posed between Labour and the Conservatives. For Sick Boy, though, as for Renton later when he argues about the Poll Tax, the only ideological division remaining is between what he sees as the twin traditionalisms of socialism and conservatism. Labour has been fully incorporated into the ideology of tradition (rendered metonymically here as the Tories) and opposition, albeit opposition equally to be rejected, is represented by the socialists.^[27] Sick Boy rejects both, in favour of an apolitical individualism and, while the novel itself never entirely endorses his choice, it shares his rejection of the socialist tradition. Welsh's staging of this rejection is more indirect than his engagement with social democracy, however, and involves a sort of polemic-by-stealth.

Life Isn't Beautiful

The socialist 'little phrases' that run through *Trainspotting* mean that socialist resonances are never far from the aware reader's attention, and one is left anticipating a direct encounter with the revolutionary tradition. Renton is knowledgeable about Brecht (29-30) and Dave Mitchell spent time at Strathclyde University as a 'student revolutionary' (251); the novel is filled with the mannerisms and language of a particular kind of socialist milieu. Welsh suggests this milieu's

socialism is insincere and ritualistic, or at best drink-fuelled sentimentality: 'a fuckin great rebel, a fuckin great socialist and a fuckin great Hibby. James Fuckin Connolly, ya cunt, Gav said to Renton' (45-6). In 'A Smart Cunt', which acts in so many ways as a pendant to *Trainspotting's* polemical concerns, Welsh positions Trotskyism — what Debord calls the 'pseudo-revolutionary dregs'[28] — in the same relation to power and repression as Labourism is to the state. Brian's father Jeff is organising against a planned needle exchange on his estate:

Thir planning tae open a centre fir aw they junkies. Needle exchange n prescriptions n aw that. It's eywis the same; cater fir aw these bloody misfits, never mind the tenants that have been peyin their rent every single week regular as clockwork.[29]

Jeff, who fancied himself as something of a hard man in his prime, organises a petition against the exchange as well as a vigilante presence to drive addicts from the estate. In the process he attracts a radical activist, Donny, whose language and tactics strongly recall those of the Socialist Workers' Party, who tries to help his campaign and to win him to socialism.[30] Donny, who tells Brian that 'you can't skate over the surface of social reality all your life' (a statement which is, Brian believes, 'revolutionary speak for: Ye cannae be a smart cunt aw yir life') has an answer:

The answer, according to Donny, is to build the revolutionary party. This is done by militant political activity in the workplaces and communities at the point of oppression. I ask him how effective this has been, and whether the collection of students, social workers, journalists and teachers that seem to make the membership of his party constitutes a fair cross-section of the proletariat.[31]

Donny and Brian's exchange reads like a parody of political commitment and apathy:

— How is it, though, that Militant seem to be able to get ordinary punters while you lot get all those middle-class types?

— Look man, I'm not going to slag Militant, cause there's enough sectarianism on the left, but...

He launches into a long and bitter attack on the politics and personalities of Scottish Labour Militant. I'm thinking, what can I do, really do for the emancipation of working people in this country, shat on by the rich, tied into political inaction by servile reliance on a reactionary, moribund and yet still unelectable Labour Party? The answer is a resounding fuck all. Getting up early to sell a couple of papers in a shopping centre is not my idea of the best way to

chill out after raving...I think I'll stick to drugs to get me through the long, dark night of late capitalism.[\[32\]](#)

Incorporating this material — and allowing himself the space to have a character vent this hostility towards the revolutionary tradition, hostility quite disconnected from the rest of the novella — strangely distorts 'A Smart Cunt.' For one thing, it forces Welsh to break with the realist register of the rest of the piece. It is highly implausible, to say the least, that the Socialist Workers Party would be involved in a campaign against a needle exchange or in alliance with a reactionary figure like Jeff. At the height of the media-fuelled ecstasy and heroin scares of the 1990s, the party's theoretical journal, *International Socialism*, ran a main article that argued 'the idea that unemployed workers who take to drugs are no longer members of the working class is as insulting as it is silly. To identify the unemployed, whether drug users or not, as part of a semi-criminal underclass is to accept the divisive ideology of the right wing.' The article went on to state that 'socialists do not object to the use of drugs to ease people out of depression... [and, under a socialist society] drugs will be used to improve the quality of life, not destroy it.'[\[33\]](#) Of course, Welsh wrote a novella and not a piece of political history, and he was not obliged to fact-check his characters' claims against models in reality. The dense specificity of the story, though — its reference to animosity towards Militant, to 'the downturn', to paper sales — make this divergence between the fictional and the real worlds all the stranger and more unsatisfactory. The debates and passions of revolutionary socialist groups active in Scotland is very much a minority affair, and one most of Welsh's readers are bound to be unfamiliar with. Why, then, this level of detail in the story? Having gone to so much trouble to establish this local and realist detail, why then does Welsh attribute a political position to a character that can so easily be shown to be false? It is hard to avoid a sense that this is a form of polemic by dishonesty, resolving political arguments from real situations by assigning roles in fiction that do not correspond to real-life participants' stated positions. It gives the novella's patterning and paralleling forms — of Labour against SWP, amongst others — a forced feel.

These details of Welsh's treatment of revolutionary socialism elsewhere are important in order to establish more clearly the way the theme receives the same treatment, albeit indirectly, in *Trainspotting*. 'A Smart Cunt' uses realist form to place a political body in an implausible situation, and suffers aesthetically accordingly for breaking the 'mimetic contract', 'wherein writer and reader share an agreement about the conditions under which texts can be composed and comprehended.'[\[34\]](#) *Trainspotting*, in its 'Bad Blood' section, dispenses with this realist plausibility. Although Welsh, throughout the novel, manages 'to introduce some little word or phrase' from a socialist vocabulary that is not his own, socialism itself — in the form of

organisations, activity or convinced activists — is everywhere absent. What he offers in its absence is a more indirect, but no less explicit, form of rejection.

I began this essay with a quote from Dave's supposed confession and the question of what role his story, and the uncertain way in which it is narrated, plays in *Trainspotting* as a whole, and want to end by offering Welsh's relation to revolutionary socialism as part of an answer. Dave claims that 'obviously I had deceived Venters about the things I did to Kevin' (259-60) but, whilst the reader is learning about how 'it took him about twenty minutes to die, twenty screaming, miserable minutes' (259) it is far from 'obvious' at all that this scene of bestial cruelty and child torture is anything other than a real part of the book's story.

Consider, after those awful details, these two endings:

There's some kids playing out in the back, the strip of grass illuminated an electric green by the brilliant sunlight. The sky is a delicious clear blue. Life is beautiful. I'm going to enjoy it, and I'm going to have a long life. I'll be what the medical staff call a long-term survivor. I just *know* that I will be. (262)

Natasha has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression, and violence, and enjoy it to the full.[\[35\]](#)

The first is the last paragraph of 'Bad Blood', Dave Mitchell's self-reflection; the words of someone caught in the satisfaction of their own revenge fantasy and visions of evil, oppression, and violence. It is also a clear allusion to, and echo of, the second section. This is the last paragraph of Leon Trotsky's 'Testament', written just months before he was killed by an agent of Stalin. Mitchell, in a grisly parody of Trotsky's Testament, echoes Trotsky's phrases ('life is beautiful', the 'strip of grass', 'delicious blue', 'brilliant sunlight') and mocks his hopes that future generations will enjoy life by summing up a form of enjoyment motivated by cruelty and vengeance instead of justice or solidarity. *Trainspotting's* vocabulary, for most of the novel, hints at an engagement with revolutionary politics to come: 'Bad Blood', to those familiar enough with the tradition to recognise the allusion, offers instead denigration and reversal. Welsh's allusion is too subtle to be noticed by those not familiar with Trotsky's writing or Trotskyist politics but is, in the context of all the knowing asides and 'little words', impossible to miss by those who know the political context. Welsh does not extend an analysis of revolutionary socialism comparable to his

attacks on reformist Labourism. The political function that 'Bad Blood's' narrative uncertainty fulfils, instead, is to shock and upset, to denigrate and to deny. His emotive material — suggested child torture — and his use of allusion, substitute emotional evocation for political analysis. Mitchell's narrative serves a purpose, but it is a purpose quite separate from the rest of the novel. He is written in to the story in order to allow a suitably dramatic and grisly mocking of the revolutionary tradition. It is in this sense, then, that one can describe 'Bad Blood' as being in bad faith: its narrative devices, and its subject material, exist to manipulate a political shock effect that the rest of *Trainspotting* cannot produce. Welsh displaces a political dilemma into a moment for allusive denigration. It is a moment of *Trainspotting* as an example of literary anti-Trotskyism.

Conclusion

One of the challenges of Welsh criticism has always been how to account for his inconsistency and contradictions. How to understand this figure who combines 'exploitation of sensationalism' with sensitivity and real anger?[36] How to understand the degeneration of a writer who wrote with such feeling for people, 'not Eurotrash, just people trying to get by'[37] to one who, in Liam McIlvanney's phrase, can now write a story that is 'a heartless blast of sadism, barren as its desert setting'.[38] Part of the answer to these questions is, perhaps, the pressure of commercialism, the lures of success and the temptation of writing to order.[39] These are all, to be sure, symptoms of a writing world dominated by corporate interests and priorities. But it is worth reflecting on 'Bad Blood's role as the first such instance of the more exploitative vein in Welsh's writing. The strengths Gardiner recognises in *Trainspotting* — its treatment of 'sectarianism, Enlightenment and colonialism' — have, to varying degrees, been the constants when Welsh has been at his most successful. His first experiment in sadism, in narrative uncertainty in the interests of exploitation of suspense and discomfort, was produced as an alternative to political engagement. Welsh drew on, or echoed, autonomist thinking to reject reformism and revolutionary socialism as 'no longer relevant' to the modern world. But Debord, for all his hostility to the existing state of organised politics, recognised that 'no *idea* could transcend the spectacle' , and dedicated his own work to thinking through alternate options for action.[40]

Welsh is a novelist, though, not a political theorist, and so he is under no obligation to follow Debord in constructing his own theory. This is not *Trainspotting's* failure, though. St Just, at the time of the French Revolution, observed that 'those who make half a revolution dig their own graves'.[41] One could make the same observation of those who make only half an engagement with revolutionary theory. Welsh, in 'A Smart Cunt', tried a direct confrontation with revolutionary socialism through the character of Donny. *Trainspotting* involves the same confrontation, but

side-on, substituting the power of shock and disgust for characterised engagement or rejection. Half-purged, then, and half-revived, like the allusion to Trotsky floating amidst the pop-cultural referents of *Trainspotting*, the revolutionary tradition has stayed a half-visible part of Welsh's writing. Rejected but not exorcised, it hovers around the margins of his work, since his first response set a precedent and model. Initiating his technique of manipulation by shock in 'Bad Blood', Welsh has taken it to ever greater extremes in later works without ever being able to re-create the aesthetic impact or achievement of that first novel.

Part of *Trainspotting*'s appeal was the way it seemed to promise a fictional coming to terms with the crises that afflict the working class in the 'post industrial world.' The dilemmas Welsh turned to, in the era of Labour's disintegration as a vehicle for working-class political aspirations, and as deep uncertainties still afflict the revolutionary socialist tradition, are still our dilemmas. Some shocks force an audience into confronting an unwelcome fact or reality. Others manipulate an existing reality, and it is hard to read Welsh's treatment of Trotsky as anything other than this kind of manipulation. Trotsky's 'Testament' is hardly well-known enough to be an allusion recognised by most of Welsh's audience; for those that do recognise it — readers most likely involved already in some way in political traditions and commitments — the manner of its presentation is designed to shut down response, not encourage it. The allusion stands as a recognition of half an insight. Whatever position a reader takes in the various controversies and debates, it is obvious that, by the mid-1970s at the very latest, large sections of the Left in Scotland and abroad felt that their own organisations and traditions were in crisis. So much thought and action of the last thirty years has concerned itself with trying to overcome that crisis, whether through probing the limits of traditional socialist thinking, accounting for the failures of the traditions of 1968, or re-examining the national context of these debates. Welsh's mistake was not that he launched an assault on Trotsky and Trotskyism. No tradition should be immune from criticism and interrogation. What is frustrating, rather, is the half-measures with which Welsh undertook this criticism, half-measures that have developed from displacement devices in 'Bad Blood' into full stylistic mannerisms and affectations by the time of the violence of his later work. The allusion with which 'Bad Blood' ends, at once gesturing at its own obviousness and setting itself up for general obscurity, is a marker for those parts of Welsh's work that have not been developed, the political ambiguities unexplored.

Welsh has proven incapable, or unwilling, of taking his initial insights any further. It will be up to future Scottish novelists to take up that challenge. So much of *Trainspotting* can serve them as an inspiration, even if, as I have tried to suggest here, 'Bad Blood's' allusiveness and substitutions must, finally, serve as an example of an aesthetic and political dead-end.[\[42\]](#)

NOTES

- [1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 105.
- [2] Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1993; New York: Norton, 1996), p. 257. Page numbers subsequently given in parentheses in the text.
- [3] See Carole Jones, '[White Men on their Backs: From Objection to Abjection](#)', *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 1, Autumn 2006.
- [4] "When we break taboos,..it doesn't mean we also break moral codes" Welsh argued in relation to his novel *Porno*, in Sally Vincent, "Everybody's Doing It", *The Guardian*, 10 August 2002.
- [5] Robert Morace, *Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting: a Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 85.
- [6] The New York Intellectuals were sometimes called 'literary Trotskyists' as a description of their engagement with Trotskyist political thought and activity. It would be foolish to press the similarities between these writers and Welsh too far; I am borrowing the term to highlight how, in his indirect and novelistic presentation of a political argument, Welsh shares an approach to Trotskyist thinking with the New York tradition. See Alan M Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: the Rise and Fall of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).
- [7] Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 89.
- [8] Jeffrey Karnicky, 'Irvine Welsh's Novel Subjectivities,' *Social Text* 21: 3, Autumn 2003, pp. 138, 149.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- [10] 'Welsh's fiction,' for Karnicky, 'is oriented toward the future, toward the creation of...new forms of identity...a Welshian subjectivity...[as characters] struggle to invent new ways of living in the contemporary world.' *Ibid.* p. 137. But without attending to the specific political legacies *Trainspotting* engages with, Karnicky's case never really develops why these *new* forms are demanded, nor considers in real detail the background against which they are being assessed, or against which other forms are being rejected.
- [11] Alan Freeman, 'Ghosts in Sunny Leith: Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*', in Susan Hageman (ed.), *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 251.
- [12] Drew Milne, 'The Fiction of James Kelman and Irvine Welsh', in Richard J Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (eds.), *Contemporary British Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 163.
- [13] Alan Riach, 'The Unnatural Scene: the Fiction of Irvine Welsh', in James Acheson and Sarah C E Ross (eds.) *The Contemporary British Novel Since 1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 38.

[14] Quoted in Riach, p. 41.

[15] Milne, p. 164.

[16] Gardiner, p. 89.

[17] In Ian Peddie, 'Speaking Welsh: Irvine Welsh in Conversation', *Scottish Studies Review*, 8: 2, Autumn 2007, pp. 132, 135.

[18] Robert Morace, 'Irvine Welsh: Parochialism, Pornography and Globalisation' in Berthold Schoene (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 228.

[19] 'The Granton Star Cause' in Irvine Welsh, *The Acid House* (New York: Norton, 1994), p. 126.

[20] 'A Smart Cunt', *The Acid House*, p. 222.

[21] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), p. 85. Emphasis in original.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[23] *The Acid House*, Acknowledgements, n.p.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 260.

[25] 'The Undefeated', Irvine Welsh, *Ecstasy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), p. 24.

[26] Quoted in Patricia Bickers, 'Oh Politics Schmolitics! Art in the Postmodern Age', *Third Text* 16: 4, 2002, p. 341.

[27] It might be objected that Sick Boy is referring to Labour when he refers to 'the socialists'. This is a plausible reading but not one which alters the essentials of my argument: in the present of the novel's narrative the Labour Party was in the process of removing the last organised socialist elements within it, via Kinnock's campaign to have the Militant Tendency expelled, and, in the present of the novel's publication, Blair had begun his, eventually successful, campaign to have the party's constitution revised in order to remove phrases associated with a commitment to socialism.

[28] Debord, p. 154.

[29] 'A Smart Cunt,' *The Acid House*, p. 189.

[30] Donny's membership is never stated explicitly in the novella, but internal evidence makes it likely that Welsh has depicted him with the SWP in mind. Donny describes the period as 'the downturn' (p. 240), a keyword for the SWP's account of capitalism in the 1980s, and Brian's account of the sociology of his party's membership accords with critics' views of the SWP, as does his negative view of selling newspapers in shopping centres. See Ian Birchall, *The Smallest Mass Party in the World* (London: Socialist Workers Party, 1981).

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 239.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 240.

[33] Audrey Farrell, 'Addicted to Profits: Capitalism and Drugs', *International Socialism*, 2: 77, Winter 1997, pp. 14, 41.

[34] The terms are Barbara Foley's. See her *Telling the Truth: the Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 40 – 41.

[35] Leon Trotsky, 'Testament', in Sarah Lovell (ed.), *Leon Trotsky Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder, 1972), p. 312.

[36] Riach, p. 45.

[37] 'Eurotrash', *The Acid House*, p. 31.

[38] Liam Mcllvaney, 'Under the Table', *The Guardian*, 21st July 2007, Review section p. 13.

[39] See Morace, 'Irvine Welsh: Parochialism, Pornography and Globalisation' for an excellent discussion of these trends in Welsh's later writing.

[40] Debord, p. 143.

[41] Quoted in Tony Cliff, *Marxism at the Millennium* (London: Bookmarks, 2000), p. 18.

[42] Thanks to Scott Hames and Eric Shelton for their comments on earlier drafts of this piece, and to Anya Tate-Manning, whose 2004 reading set the associations in motion.

Forms of Culture in Hugh MacDiarmid's 'Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa'^[1]

Michael Whitworth

The debate concerning the relation of high to low culture, and the larger debate concerning the relation of culture to society was particularly vigorous in the early 1930s. While its roots can be traced back to the late eighteenth-century, as they are in Raymond Williams's classic study, *Culture and Society*, the early 1930s saw the publication of several significant texts: F. R. Leavis's *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (1930), and, co-authored with Denys Thompson, his *Culture and Environment* (1933); Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932); and the first issue of *Scrutiny*, which appeared in 1932. Hugh MacDiarmid was aware of the debate, and contributed to it directly in his prose and more obliquely in his poetry, including 'Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa' (hereafter 'Etika'), which first appeared in *Stony Limits and Other Poems* (1934). For MacDiarmid, the most significant questions about culture were how elite art forms could engage a mass audience without losing their value as art, how increased leisure in the 'leisure state' would affect culture, and what happens to aesthetic values in an era of mass production. MacDiarmid was certainly aware of the *Scrutiny* school of criticism: he reviewed Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) in September 1932, and later incorporated several lines from it in 'On a Raised Beach'.^[2] He was also aware of the debate about how the rhythm of life might be affected by growing mechanisation. In the journal *Purpose*, to which MacDiarmid contributed in 1930, one writer remarked on the need for life to maintain a 'human rhythm' in an era of 'accelerated' events.^[3] F. R. Leavis expressed the opinion that man should be governed by the 'seasonal rhythm' of his relation to his environment.^[4] In the *New English Weekly*, in an article that took *Fiction and the Reading Public* as its starting point, H. J. Travers opined that 'We cannot expect to evolve a culture without leisure. Leisure pre-supposes a self-determined rhythm of life, and its test is a capacity for solitude'. Few individuals, however, could stand the test: 'Our life-rhythm is determined by the machines'.^[5] MacDiarmid read Travers's article, and, as I have shown elsewhere, incorporated these lines into 'On a Raised Beach'.^[6] 'Etika' focuses more specifically on cultural production in the era of the culture industry and of

mechanical reproduction; as these phrases suggest, in my reading of 'Etika', MacDiarmid's thinking anticipates that of Theodor Adorno. The present article is also concerned to show how MacDiarmid builds the poem by selectively plagiarising prose sources. MacDiarmid's selection creates a pessimistic vision of the present, while holding out hope for a cultural future in which individual genius can contribute to a unified culture without being compromised.

The debate concerning high and low culture, and the potentially limiting effects of each, overlapped with one of MacDiarmid's longer-established concerns, the expansion of human consciousness. The idea that the purpose of art was the expansion of human consciousness, implicit in 'The Assault on Humanism' (1923), was more explicitly articulated in 'Art and the Unknown' (1926).^[7] Set in contrast to the idea of 'expansion' is that of the 'short-circuiting' of human consciousness. Both ideas appear in MacDiarmid's 1932 review of F. R. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry*; the idea of the expansion of consciousness informs his endorsement of Leavis's remark that 'Poetry matters because of the kind of poet who is more alive than other people, more alive in his own age. He is, as it were, at the most conscious point of the race in his time'.^[8] The idea appears more explicitly when MacDiarmid considers Leavis's idea that 'mass culture' is destroying the capacity to read poetry. Leavis remarks that 'The ordinary cultivated reader is ceasing to be able to read poetry. In self-defence amid the perpetual avalanche of print he has had to acquire reading habits that incapacitate him when the signals for unaccustomed and subtle responses present themselves'.^[9] Echoing Leavis's physiological language of signals and responses, MacDiarmid concurs that 'the short-circuiting of human consciousness' is a matter of 'urgent concern'.^[10]

In 'Etika', MacDiarmid borrows from texts about two popular cultural forms, the cinema and the theatre, one in the ascendant, the other suffering from its competition. The possibility that the poem borrowed from a prose source was first raised by W. N. Herbert, who suggested that the lines 'one step in a *Kino* [...] *3/4 Takt*' (*CP*, I, 409) might derive from a film review.^[11] In fact a significant section of the poem derives from a critical survey of the career of the German director G. W. Pabst, written by the American Marxist film critic Harry Alan Potamkin, and published in *Hound and Horn*.^[12] The poem also borrows extensively from three other prose sources, two of them also articles in *Hound and Horn*. One of the articles concerns the Yiddish theatre of New York, while the other concerns performances by the Indian dance troupe and musicians working with Uday Shan-kar.^[13] The third source is a critical text on Anton Chekhov, from which MacDiarmid borrows both phrases from Chekhov's notebooks and phrases from the critic. The sources for 'Etika' range across many different art forms and are international in scope. However, MacDiarmid's compositional process is highly selective, sometimes allowing glimpses of the territorial diversity of the sources, but at other times concealing them.

The date of the last of MacDiarmid's sources, in *Hound and Horn* for 'January-March 1933', gives a broad indication of the earliest possible date of composition of the poem.^[14] However, it appears that the poem was given a title only shortly before MacDiarmid sent *Stony Limits* to its publishers. *Etika Preobrazhennogo Erosa* was a work by the exiled Russian philosopher Boris Petrovich Vysheslavtzev (1877-1954), published in Paris in 1931. It is almost certain that MacDiarmid knew of the work only through an article by Nathalie Duddington that appeared in *The New Atlantis* in January 1934; MacDiarmid's 'Genethliacon for the New World Order' appeared in the same issue.^[15] In Duddington's review the second word of Vysheslavtzev's title is mistakenly given as 'Preobrazhennavo', and MacDiarmid followed her error. Duddington's translation of the title was 'Ethics of the Transfigured Eros'; Vysheslavtzev's philosophy, or Duddington's account of it, is relevant primarily to the poem's references to spiritual aspiration and the sublimation of the self in a larger force.

The poem has attracted little more than passing comment from critics, with the majority overlooking its interest in cinema, and focusing instead on class. For Gish, it is one of a group of shorter philosophical poems; she quotes only the lines about coming closer to the working classes (*CP*, I, 407). Oxenhorn also focuses on class, quoting lines from the opening paragraph (ll.9-13) about the intelligentsia winning up to the level of the proletariat. He too groups it with the shorter philosophical poems, which, by contrast with 'On a Raised Beach', he views as 'pedantic' and 'brittle'. Bold discusses the more visionary aspect of class consciousness, focussing on the lines in which the narrator leads up the mountain to the 'great summit' (*CP*, I, 410). Herbert, the only critic to mention the cinema, is concerned more with technical questions, 'Etika' being one of the poems in which MacDiarmid begins to introduce found personae and 'found material'.^[16] While it is true that the poem lacks the verbal fireworks that make the synthetic English poems so distinctive, and while it must be conceded that MacDiarmid's invocation of the cultural superiority of Russia is complacent, nevertheless, there is much more to the poem than the issue of being at one with the working classes. As in many of MacDiarmid's poems, the argument is digressive: it begins with the question of how the intelligentsia might unite with the working classes, but moves on, first to the question of how cinematic art can represent the working classes honestly and profoundly, without superficial technique overpowering the content; this leads to the next question, focussed on the Horatian tag 'exegi monumentum aere perennius', of the durability of art; finally, the poem moves to its visionary invocation of Russia, where MacDiarmid believes the individual to have been merged into the larger process or rhythm.

The poem's opening paragraph presents several puzzles:

Miseducated and more articulate,
Sensitised by what numbs their fate
And raised up by what keeps them down,
Only by the severest intellectual discipline
Can one of the bourgeois intelligentsia win
Up to the level of the proletariat [...] (*CP*, I, 407)

There is a grammatical ambiguity: as 'more articulate' clearly invokes comparison with 'the proletariat', it would be possible to read 'their fate' and 'them' as referring to the working classes. The opening sentences would then suggest that the same agent sensitises the intelligentsia and numbs the proletariat. Alternatively, 'their' and 'them' might refer only to the intelligentsia, in which case the poem is presenting a paradox: how can the same agent work such diverse effects? I prefer the second of these two readings, but the grammatical ambiguity enacts one of the poem's larger questions: how much separates the intelligentsia from the proletariat? Are the intelligentsia really as superior in their sensitivity as they have been brought up to believe? More important than the grammatical puzzle is the identity of the agent which both sensitizes and numbs. I would suggest that the agent is culture, and that the paradoxes may be resolved by consideration of some of its internal divisions.

One might identify the sensitising agent with high culture, and the numbing agent with mass culture. Certainly there is much in the rest of the poem to encourage this reading. However, 'culture' can be divided in other ways. In a contemporaneous essay, MacDiarmid suggests that the education of the masses is hindered by the existence of 'a parasitical "interpreting class" which talks down to the working classes. Such cultural interpreters 'insist that the level of utterance should be that of popular understanding, and jeer at what is not expressed in the jargon of the man-in-the-street'; it is not the producers of difficult works of art who are 'the enemies of the people', but the interpreting class; 'what their attitude amounts to is "keeping the people in their place", stereotyping their stupidity'.^[17] In this reading, 'they' are sensitised by works of art themselves, but numbed by the interpreting class. MacDiarmid views the interpreting class as part of a larger 'socio-economic-political-journalistic' conspiracy to prevent mass education. The 'journalistic' component is significant: mass culture in the form of journalism interposes itself between human subjects and the world, filtering experience, preventing genuinely new thought.

MacDiarmid's borrowings from Potamkin begin in the poem's second paragraph. Although they are extensive, providing about 150 of the poem's words, they are, when measured against Potamkin's essay of about 5000 words, selective. It should be emphasised that there is no evidence that MacDiarmid was familiar with the films discussed in the article. I have translated

their titles for the sake of convenience – Potamkin himself sometimes gives German titles, sometimes English ones – but I have not summarised their contents, on the grounds that such summaries would be superfluous. MacDiarmid engaged with the idea of film through Potamkin's critical discourse.

Potamkin presents Pabst as a director divided between a social and ethical sense and an aesthetic one: the former was most prominent in *Westfront 1918* and in *Kameradschaft* ('Comradeship' [1931]), while the latter tended to dominate *Pandora's Box*. Potamkin distrusts not only the glossy surface of some of Pabst's films, but also the derivative quality of *Pandora's Box*, and the allure of psychological drama. Through selective quotation, MacDiarmid emphasises Potamkin's criticisms, while neglecting his praise for the 'ethical' films, *Kameradschaft* above all. MacDiarmid is interested, like Adorno, in the triumph of facile technique in the culture industry. MacDiarmid's borrowings begin tentatively. Potamkin writes in his opening paragraph of the mood of 'self-pity' that overtook the petty-bourgeois class in Germany after 1918, and sees Pabst's first film, *Die freudlose Gasse* ('Joyless Street' [1925]), as arising from this social and cultural context: from these paragraphs emerge MacDiarmid's lines '*Die freudlose Gasse*, a simplistic cry / Swimming in petty-bourgeois self-pity'. Potamkin views Pabst's early period as an apprenticeship in which he 'was gaining his cinema knowledge': in phrases which MacDiarmid borrows almost unaltered, Potamkin describes Pabst as having 'worked within the double tendency of the German *lichtspiel* toward the real, away from the real' (Potamkin 294). The following sentence, which MacDiarmid does not explicitly use, is also of interest: Potamkin blames 'the dominant control' in Germany (meaning by 'control' something like 'die Kontrolle' in the sense of surveillance) and 'the straitjacketed studio-mind' for turning the 'energies' of *Die freudlose Gasse* into "ingratiating virtuosités", billows and columns of light, engineering pomposities architectural shells, remarkable but vain'. The idea that works of art might be distorted or adulterated by forces beyond the artist's control was one that interested MacDiarmid in 'Problems of Poetry To-Day' and elsewhere, particularly with regard to mass culture.

In his next paragraph, Potamkin examines Pabst's turn towards a more psychological drama, first in *Geheimnisse einer Seele* ('Secrets of a Soul' [1926]), then *Die Liebe der Jeanne Ney* ('The Love of Jeanne Ney' [1927]), *Abwege* ('Crisis' [1928]), and *Die Büchse der Pandora* ('Pandora's Box' [1929]). Potamkin presents the German middle classes at the time as self-indulgent and decadent, 'whirlpooling the individualized neuroses that flattered and satisfied the middle class'. Pabst himself had been 'ricocheted into this vortex' (Potamkin 295). From this passage come MacDiarmid's lines 'Routines of literary closets, *Abwege*, ricochettings / Into vortices of pseudo-psychologisings' (*CP*, I, 408). The next lines come from Potamkin's dissection of the failings of *Pandora's Box*, which he attributes in part to Pabst's technique having developed beyond the

demands of his material, and in part to Pabst's literary sources lacking depth. His sources 'were not profound relationships but only exhibits, more effete than Pabst's earlier ones and therefore more treacherous: they stop Pabst at the surface of his films, entice him to exploits chic, pseudo-intellectual, seeming so subtle yet really saying nothing' (Potamkin 296). This argument MacDiarmid condenses into 'Not profound relationships but only exhibits, / Chic, treacherous, effete' (CP, I, 408). The shift of register which occurs when MacDiarmid's speaker's expresses his exasperation with fetishised technique – 'For Christ sake let us cease being subtle' – is all MacDiarmid's own, but the archaic spelling of 'subtle' derives from something later in Potamkin's article.

In his next paragraph, Potamkin considers H.D.'s comparison of *Die freudlose Gasse* with the work of the Russian director Kuleshov. [18] H.D. had preferred Pabst because, in her words, he took 'the human mind as far as it can go', while the Russian took the spirit 'further than it can go'. Potamkin comments that 'Pabst would not subscribe to her fear of the maximum'. In the poem, these lines serve to introduce the theme of the journey of the spirit towards the 'great summit' (CP, I, 410). MacDiarmid transforms them into the following:

Fear of the maximum? Oh, ho!
You are no way near it.
It won't serve to take the human mind
Just as far as it can go.
You must take the spirit
Further . . . (CP, I, 408).

MacDiarmid's transformation of the prose source eliminates the explicit comparison between the German and the Russian director, with the result that the appearance of Russia in the poem some paragraphs later is unexpected.

The theme of the 'maximum' at this point also suggests Vysheslvtzev's philosophy. In Duddington's account, Vysheslvtzev was concerned with 'the insufficiency of the "ethics of the law"'. [19] A morality based on 'prohibitions and imperatives' might alter a man's conduct, but it could never alter his heart. She goes on to explain: 'It is only through the love of the moral ideal, conceived not as an abstract ideal but as a living Being embodying the fulness of perfection, that human nature can be sublimated, and its creative activities released in the service of the Highest.' In practice, 'the moral regeneration of man consists in raising this "Eros" from the lower to the higher range of values, until the whole of our nature is transfigured and sanctified.' Of course, at

this point in the poem, there is no hint of Vysheslavtzev's vocabulary of transcendence, but the reference to spiritual aspiration prepares the ground for the poem's concluding section.

MacDiarmid's next verse paragraph borrows more heavily than any other from Potamkin's essay. Potamkin attributes a change in Pabst's work to his having seen Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion and Death of Joan of Arc* (1928). In this film he found 'a maximum of intensity of conscience and intensiveness of treatment'. To summarise the change, Potamkin resorts to a distinctive metaphorical language which transforms the formal properties of film into a quite different register: 'The artist of keen nerve-ends could no longer yield to his periphery, to topographies that gave neither the lay of the land nor its consistency'. These lines entered the poem almost unchanged. Potamkin argues that the source for *Pandora's Box* was already too far removed from reality to be used as a source for a film, being 'a network of negotiations and not the experience of people'; in consequence the film consisted of 'figures of speech stalking as men and women' (Potamkin 297). In the conclusion to the paragraph, Potamkin creates another striking metaphor for the fault in Pabst's film art: *Pandora's Box* is 'skin drawn over a hollow body, and, though tantalizing contours are etched on the parchment, they are ephemera, illusive momentarily' (Potamkin 298). This paragraph of the essay yields the first six lines of MacDiarmid's verse paragraph:

The artist of keen nerve-ends
Can no longer yield to his periphery;
To a topography that gives neither the lie of the land
Nor its consistency, where figures of speech
Go stalking as men and women, skins drawn
Over hollow bodies, ephemera, momentarily illusive. (CP, I, 408)

Within the poem, the phrase 'skins drawn / Over hollow bodies' refers back to the earlier phrase about producers trying to 'get under the skin', but revitalizes the clichéd phrase by elaborating it. Potamkin goes on to describe how Pabst overcame the fetishisation of technique, how he 'broke through this aura'. In *Westfront 1918*, 'he had produced the least showman-like of war-films, a picture intensive in its character-convergence, sharply attenuated in its character-relations, not spreading like valiant steam into an ominous yet compelling universe' (Potamkin 298).

MacDiarmid's main transformation is to recast Potamkin's perfect tense as a series of imperatives:

He must break through that aura—he must give
Intensive character-convergence, make outstand
Character-relations that do not merely spread

Like valiant steam into an ominous but compelling world,
And stop being just a bloody showman
Of guilt or innocence stuffed with straw (*CP*, I, 408)

While, in the fifth line, 'showman' derives from Potamkin, the shift into the demotic register of the rest of the line is apparently MacDiarmid's invention; the six lines acquire an urgency that was not to be found in the original essay. 'Stuffed with straw' might suggest Eliot's 'The Hollow Men', but derives from a later paragraph in Potamkin's essay. The paragraph consists mostly of praise for Pabst's *Die Dreigroschenoper* (known in English as 'The Beggar's Opera' [1931]), and of its maturity and 'bold figures'; MacDiarmid however, picks out the one phrase that makes a contrast with the artificial characters of the earlier films, 'merely guilt or innocence stuffed with straw' (Potamkin 299).

Potamkin goes on to consider *Kameradschaft* in some detail, but MacDiarmid uses only a very few words from this section of the essay, and these are from a phrase that criticises the prevailing tendency of German cinema. Pabst, Potamkin remarks, 'is always close to the ethical fiber of the event, and from this steadfastness emanates the artistry—a significant development in Pabst and the German *kino*, sluggish amidst lost-glory and bockbier films set to goosestep measures and *3/4 takt*' (Potamkin 302). Potamkin concludes his account of *Kameradschaft* in the following paragraph, remarking that the film, 'because it re-establishes the cinema on the firm ground of the concrete record of an event of mass-reference, and that outside the land of the proletarian rule', is 'of mighty significance'. He goes on in the following paragraph to return to H.D.'s phrase about 'the maximum', and asks whether there will be 'a step beyond this maximum'. He compares Pabst favourably to Erich Pommer, suggesting that they represent the two poles of contemporary German cinema, and that around Pommer will gather 'the ingenious composers of sophisticated kino-doggerel', while around Pabst will gather 'the poets'. Somewhere between the two he places Leontine Sagan, whose *Mädchen in Uniform* ('Girls in Uniform' [1931]) had been widely praised. The phrase about a 'step beyond [the] maximum' provides the framework for MacDiarmid's last significant borrowing from Potamkin:

That is the way – one step in a *Kino*
Sluggish amid jingo lost-glory and *Bockbier* films,
Set to goosestep measures and *3/4 Takt*;
One step at least on grounds of mass-reference,
Outside the land of proletarian rule at that!;
All the difference between Pabst and Pommer;

Between an artist and the ingenious composers
Of sophisticated *Kino-doggerel*. (*CP*, I, 409).

It is possible that 'sincere' in 'No matter how "sincere" the creative act' also quotes Potamkin's description of Sagan as 'sincere but cautious', but no other words in this or the adjacent lines obviously derive from Potamkin. At this point MacDiarmid begins to ask questions which dismantle the various distinctions accumulated along the way: all artistic facts become 'a sop to Cerberus'.

MacDiarmid extracts from Potamkin's prose a distinctive vocabulary of cinema-critique, composed both of technical jargon such as 'character-convergence' and 'mass-reference', and of more vivid and individual tropes such as topography and skin. The accumulation of this vocabulary suggests that cinema can and should be taken seriously as a medium, and that it is possible to distinguish between a superficial cinema and one which searches for the truth. However, the poem accumulates a vocabulary consisting largely of negative judgements and gives little clue as to how the truth might be reached; Potamkin's article contained a quite different balance. MacDiarmid's selective reading of Potamkin builds an argument in which cinema consists largely of showmanship. The poem's imperatives suggest that the full potential of cinema still lay in the future, and had not already been achieved.

The concept of rhythm, introduced through the reference of 'goosestep measures', is a theme which provides continuity between the sections adapted from Potamkin and the later paragraphs. It also relates the poem to the wider cultural debate about leisure: the choice between the machine age and leisure was often presented in terms of a choice between mechanical and organic rhythms. Cinema was often criticised not for its rhythm as such, but for the related problem of its predetermined tempo: whereas the reader can choose the pace of his or her reading, the cinema-goer cannot alter the pace of the cinematic experience. As one reviewer of Pudovkin's *On Film Technique* had written, 'Speed is the desire of an industrial age, and the glittering, rapid world of the cinema screen, ever keeping time with the running strip of celluloid, is an expression of that desire. All is quickened upon the screen, nothing is prolonged save that ultimate "close-up" kiss [...]'.^[20] It is notable that, in one of his few other verse references to cinema, in an epic simile in 'The Progress of Poetry', MacDiarmid singles out the moment where the technology of cinema breaks down, and the audience is freed from the predetermined tempo:

as when a film unexpectedly stops running
And dynamic significance is lost and one sees instead

A sharp static beauty and feels after all it is sometimes grand
To look long and intently at one thing at a time (*CP*, I, 456)

Although tempo is not identical to rhythm, those who distrusted the cinema as a medium of mass culture were opposed the authoritarian implications of a predetermined and high tempo and mechanical rhythm. The phrase 'goosestep measures' encompasses both.

The tone of 'Etika' changes with the conclusion of the section derived from Potamkin. The rhetorical questions suggest that the artist's freedom is limited, and that the ultimate fate of 'monuments more lasting than brass' is to be thrown on the scrap heap. The passage is obscure in several ways:

Yet what
Is this and every such artistic fact
No matter how "sincere" the creative act
But a sop to Cerberus? the "cultural compulsives"
At work on "our fellow travellers"? Rather nods from Homer
Than such kitsch. (*CP*, I, 409)

Surprisingly, given the extent of the plagiarism up to this point, MacDiarmid places key phrases in quotation marks. It is possible that he derived 'cultural compulsives' and 'our fellow travellers' from the *New English Weekly*, specifically from an article by Gorham Munson and letter in response. The former phrase came from the Marxist critic V. F. Calverton, and referred to those cultural conventions which are beyond an author's control.^[21] Though MacDiarmid read the *New English Weekly* regularly, and borrowed from it in other poems, these sources do little to clarify the passage.^[22] MacDiarmid's use of quotation marks is the most significant fact: neither liberal-individualist ideas of 'sincerity' nor Marxist ideas of cultural determinism are adequate to the kind of cinema he wants, or to the philosophy of creativity that he wishes to advance.

The following paragraph, 'Let us look elsewhere' (ll.93-114), turns to a new source, Moe Bragin's 'Obituary' for Jewish Art Theatre, which had appeared in the *Hound and Horn* in 1932. If it was unlikely that MacDiarmid knew Pabst's films, it is still more improbable, geographically and linguistically, that he knew the plays to which Bragin refers. Once again, in what follows I have restricted my account to the information available to MacDiarmid in his prose source.

Bragin begins by contrasting the current state of American Jewish culture with the situation in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, when there had been a revival of Yiddish culture.

'That was ten years ago', he reflects; 'All seems clinkers now, with a few of that bewildered generation still poking in the ash'. Some, he remarks, have gone to Palestine, while others have joined 'the Left'; 'the rest have lost whatever idealism they had – a pathological flabbiness in its place pointing nowhere after the prolonged aching priapism' (Bragin 283). MacDiarmid's more colloquial phrases often appear to be his own interpolations: this is the case with the 'bloody' showman earlier in the poem, and again here when he substitutes 'folk' for Bragin's 'generation'; but 'clinkers' comes directly from Bragin. The deletion, at this point, of any clear reference to Jewish culture means that the idealism of post-war Jewish culture becomes MacDiarmid's less culturally specific 'more purposeful existence'; in any case MacDiarmid sees this existence as an illusion, a cog in the larger 'machine'.

Bragin, having set the scene, turns to explain the decline in Yiddish theatre. He identifies three main causes: competition with the 'talkies'; the decline of the Yiddish language in America; and the influence of the director Maurice Schwartz. Schwartz had recognised the vigour and richness of the Yiddish theatre tradition, but had been unsympathetic in his attitude towards it: he 'tried to play each of the various stops on the Jewish flute' (Bragin 285). In adapting this phrase, MacDiarmid again generalises the situation, making the 'Jewish' flute 'old-fashioned' instead. Schwartz's vulgarisation and simplification of a rich tradition comes to stand for any form of culturally exhausted enterprise. 'As well read novels, or newspapers even, or Hansard; / Take Ramsay MacDonald seriously, or go to church' interpolates MacDiarmid, giving Bragin's words a specifically British field of reference.

However, when he came to the paragraph in which Bragin surveys Schwartz's failings, MacDiarmid did not remove the specific cultural pointers; so deeply embedded were they in the prose, it would have been impossible to try. Bragin wrote thus:

In "Jew Suss" we find him [Maurice Schwartz] bogged deep in historical treacle and onion tears. Sensationalism and downright vulgarity followed as in "Uncle Moses." The Uncle shows off the rich apartment to the daughter of the lantsman who, though she loathes the suits manufacturer, has become betrothed to him for the sake of her poor parents. We get the scene in the pokey bedroom, the red light symbolical, Moses sweetishly seductive, the whole timing prolonged torturously when the episode had no purpose in itself. Here the whole preparation delayed as if to bring us all to the climax at the same stroke. The atmosphere as of a stag party with the horn soon to be brought into play. The curtain drops. We shudder, seeing, as if staring unblinkingly at a "mystic photo", painted on the proscenium, on the walls, on the faces of the audience, the poor

lamb being tupp'd. Even with this, fewer coppers rang in the register. So Mr Schwartz forced down our throats wrenched cheapish humor. An instance: the scene in "Stempanyoo" where the two sons of the rich Jew, the poretz, quarrel and spit into one another's faces and into the faces of the other characters in the room. (Bragin 286)

Before drawing on this passage, MacDiarmid borrows from another which appears later in the essay. Bragin contrasts Schwartz's company with the Habima players, remarking that the latter 'could never have leaned on the crutch of "Yiddishkeit."' He also reports that, at a dinner Schwarz gave in honour of the Habima Players, one of them called Schwartz's Yiddish Art Company 'a bunch of hams and shysters' (Bragin 287). These phrases yield MacDiarmid's bridge: 'Bunches of hams and shysters, / With all the fat thumb business / And a Yiddishkeit crutch' (CP, I, 410). MacDiarmid then selects from the longer passage to produce

In *Jew Süss*, *Stempanyov* [sic], *Uncle Moses*
Sweetishly seductive, the poky bedroom, the symbolical red light,
Till when the curtain drops we shudder, seeing,
As if staring unblinkingly
At a "mystic photo" painted on the proscenium,
On the walls, on the faces of the audience,
The poor lamb being tupp'd. (CP, I, 410).

Whereas Bragin had differentiated between the artistically vibrant Jewish theatre tradition represented by the Habima Playerrrs and the commercialised and derivative one represented by Schwartz, MacDiarmid's recontextualisation of Bragin's phrases does not allow any hope for the future to emerge from Jewish theatre. MacDiarmid makes the scene in *Uncle Moses* represent the prostitution of theatre to powerful financial interests, an appropriative reading that Bragin had only hinted at. Were this paragraph treated in isolation, there might appear to be an anti-semitic undercurrent to MacDiarmid's reshaping of Bragin: the theatre becomes a shady business indistinguishable from pornographic entertainment and prostitution.^[23] Certainly, in a limited sense of the word, his account of Jewish theatre is prejudiced: being entirely derived from Bragin, it relates to plays that MacDiarmid could not have seen performed. However, though MacDiarmid's use of Bragin is undeniably selective, it is no more so than his use of Potamkin, which produced a similarly one-sided picture of G. W. Pabst.

The paragraph contains several pointers to MacDiarmid's ideas about culture. The first and most obvious is the reference to the 'turnbuckles' that hold 'us' in 'the machine: although MacDiarmid

had remained detached from the concept of the 'cultural compulsive', the image of society presented here is unambiguously deterministic. The concluding images of the theatre audience also imply a deterministic view. Although the meaning of the phrase 'mystic photo' remains obscure, the rest of the passage implies that it was a device which left a retinal after-image. As such, it is a powerful image for the ability of even the most disposable cultural forms to invade and alter consciousness.

The final two paragraphs of 'Etika', though still oratorical, are more balanced and discriminating, and, as verse, move more fluently. It seems possible that the description of the mountains (ll.118-30) is indebted to a review or discussion of a film about mountaineering – several such films were in circulation by 1933 – but, if so, no source has been identified. Although the transition to the three more abstract lines that conclude the paragraph is abrupt, these lines summarise an important idea for MacDiarmid: the proletariat wish to become bourgeois only because they have been 'half-wakened' (l.133), and have been kept in their place by the 'interpreting class'; a full awakening would allow the proletariat fully to become themselves.

The first lines of the final paragraph appear to break with the mountain imagery, interpreting the state of attaining the 'great summit' as being the attainment of a form of harmony:

This is the music of humanity
Here 'where everything is forgiven
And it would be impossible not to forgive'; (*CP*, I, 410)

However, later in the paragraph the 'outwelling of light' which moves 'upwards within itself' continues the imagery of ascent, though transforming it into a more abstract form. Moreover, a submerged connection to the mountain scene may be found in one of MacDiarmid's sources. Anton Chekhov had written in his notebooks:

Essentially all this is crude and meaningless, and romantic love appears as meaningless as an avalanche which involuntarily rolls down a mountain and overwhelms people. But when one listens to music, all this is—that some people lie in their graves and sleep, and that one woman is alive and, grey-haired, is now sitting in a box in the theatre, seems quiet and majestic, and the avalanche no longer meaningless, since in nature everything has a meaning. And everything is forgiven, and it would be strange not to forgive.[\[24\]](#)

While the phrase 'the music of humanity' establishes the most important theme of the final paragraph, the source text, once recognised, enriches the theme of engulfment and self-obliteration, and connects it to the mountain imagery.

MacDiarmid's source was not the Hogarth Press's 1921 edition of Chekhov's notebooks, but a critical study of Chekhov by W. A. Gerhardi. Commenting on Chekhov's lines, Gerhardi remarks upon the 'high indifference of nature to the ultimate importance of our ego'; the 'justification of all life in the balance of obliteration; mercy and stability in the ultimate release of the individual soul; and forgiveness in the thought that eventually no individual deed will matter individually'.^[25] Gerhardi's remarks are incorporated with very little change into the five lines running from 'Justification of all life' to 'Eventually matters individually'.

The theme of music, derived from Chekhov, develops the earlier reference to the mechanical and authoritarian rhythms of mass culture, films 'Set to goosetep measures and $3/4$ *Takt*', and, more broadly, connects the poem to the wider debate about rhythm in relation to leisure in the 'machine age'. Unlike the 'self-determined rhythm of life' which H. J. Travers had decreed as a prerequisite for leisure, 'the universal pulse' is one over which the individual could have no control; unlike Leavis's 'seasonal rhythm', it has metaphysical overtones.

However, in the final five lines of the poem, MacDiarmid attempts to qualify the self-abnegation implied by the 'universal rhythm':

. . . But who knows this summit, this peak moment,
As Lenin kept his beat in Russia,
Or as one who in the circle of *tabla taranga*
Finds the time between precipitating notes
To arrange a drum that has got off key by a hair's breadth? (*CP*, I, 411)

If there is a source for the idea of Lenin keeping his beat, I have not discovered it.^[26] The passage implies that certain exceptional figures, whether political or artistic, can find freedom within the 'universal pulse'.

In resolving the conflicting claims of the individual and the collective by reference to Indian music, MacDiarmid might be accused of an evasive exoticism. However, the reference to the *tabla taranga* comes from the same issue of the *Hound and Horn* as Potamkin's article on Pabst. There René Daumal had written in praise of the percussionist Vishnu Dass, who provided music for Uday Shan-kar's dance troupe, 'seated within the circle of his ten drums (*tabla taranga*): 'In the

middle of a stairway dizzy with sound, Vishnu Dass finds the time between two precipitating notes, to arrange nonchalantly a drum which may have got off key by a hair's breadth'.^[27] Daumal's reference to the 'stairway' provides another submerged point of connection with the theme of ascent that had begun in the previous paragraph.

The music performed by Shan-kar's troupe was by no means universally praised. It would be interesting to note, if a relatively late date of composition for 'Etika' were to be confirmed, that in November 1933, MacDiarmid's friend Kaikhosru Sorabji criticised the music performed by Shan-kar's troupe for its 'formlessness' and lack of real artistic significance. He gave eloquent praise to the drummer, for his dexterity and ability to produce 'small shreds and wisps of sound more like little patches of cloud than anything else, or swirling bits of vapour'. However, the drummer's technical ability served only to underline Sorabji's main point: 'this amazing virtuoso has nothing at all worthy of his powers upon which to work'.^[28] Sorabji's view of the drummer is similar to Potamkin's view of Pabst's glossier work as a triumph of technique over content. If it were possible to show that the final lines of 'Etika' were composed after Sorabji's article reached MacDiarmid, then MacDiarmid's quotation of Daumal is his way of indirectly entering into dialogue with his friend, arguing that not all virtuosity is empty.

'Etika Preobrazhennavo Erosa' is not simply a poem about the intelligentsia coming closer to the working classes. Nor is it of interest simply as an exercise in the adaptation of prose sources to create fictional personae, though any reading of it must take those sources and that process into account. It concerns cultural forms, their relation to the emerging culture industries, their power to imprint themselves on consciousness, and their power to keep social classes in their places. MacDiarmid's survey of forms of cultural activity finds much cause for pessimism, and his selective reading of his prose sources accentuates this impression. He suggests that in Pabst's films, a glossy technical facility has triumphed over more profound representations of class relations. He insinuates that in the theatre sensationalism and vulgarity have debased a more subtle tradition. The rhythms of culture are not 'self-determined': they have become mechanised, 'goosestep measures'. Moreover, by drawing on critical texts throughout, MacDiarmid may imply that the 'interpreting class' has successfully interposed itself between aesthetic experience and the subject eager for knowledge. MacDiarmid's turn 'to Russia' for a more hopeful future is not entirely persuasive; though we must concede that his contemporaries were more familiar with the achievements of Russian cinema than the present-day reader, the poem fails in that it provides no concrete account of Russian culture that might balance the negative constructions of Pabst and Yiddish theatre.

Nevertheless, the poem escapes from pessimism. It does so in MacDiarmid's final visionary invocation of a state of culture in which the individual might become partially absorbed into the collective endeavour. The 'universal pulse' might in practice be as oppressive as 'goosestep measures', but the passage describing it allows us to believe that it would be a more organic rhythm, one which would allow the individual performer, like Vishnu Dass, space for virtuosity, without that virtuosity overwhelming the larger endeavour. Gerhardt's lines about the 'release of the individual soul' come to stand for a version of Vysheslavtsev's philosophy, in which human nature is sublimated in the service of 'the Highest.'

Moreover MacDiarmid's poem responds to 'the interpreting class', and their attempt to deny the alterity of the creative work. If criticism works to predigest the experiences of cinema, theatre, and dance, then the poem works to dismantle criticism as a form. The malign influence of the 'interpreting class' is here remedied by MacDiarmid's ability first to identify the most imaginatively intense moments in critical prose, and then to reshape them as a new creative work.

NOTES

[1] This essay derives indirectly from the author's research project 'Science, Poetry, and Specialization, 1900-1942'. The author gratefully acknowledges the Leverhulme Trust for enabling the project through a Research Fellowship.

[2] Hugh MacDiarmid, 'New Bearings in English Poetry', *The Raucle Tongue*, ed. by Angus Calder, Glen Murray, and Alan Riach, 3 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996-97), II, 340-42; 'On a Raised Beach', *Complete Poems*, ed. by Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken, 2 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), I, 422-33 (p.425); hereafter cited as *CP*. The borrowing from Leavis was first noted by Ruth McQuillan, 'Hugh MacDiarmid's "On a Raised Beach"', *Akros*, 12.34-35 (August 1977), 87-97.

[3] W. T. Symons, 'Money, Time and Life', *Purpose*, 2.2 (Apr.-June 1930), 65-72. MacDiarmid's contribution to this issue was 'Allen Upward and the Facilitation of Genius', reprinted in *Raucle Tongue*, II, 373-76.

[4] F. R. Leavis, 'Under Which King, Bezonian', *Scrutiny*, 1.3 (Dec. 1932), 205-14 (p.208).

[5] H. J. Travers, 'Views and Reviews: The Modern Echo', *New English Weekly*, 1 (28 July 1932), 357-58.

[6] Michael H. Whitworth 'Three Prose Sources for Hugh MacDiarmid's "On a Raised Beach"', *Notes and Queries* 54 (June 2007), 175-77; Whitworth, 'Culture and Leisure in Hugh MacDiarmid's "On a Raised Beach"', *Scottish Studies Review*, 9 no.1 (2008), 123-43.

- [7] MacDiarmid, 'The Assault on Humanism' (16 Oct. 1923), *Raucle Tongue*, I, 109-112; 'Art and the Unknown' (20 and 27 May 1926), *Selected Prose*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), 39-43.
- [8] Leavis, qtd. MacDiarmid, *Raucle Tongue*, II, 341.
- [9] Leavis, qtd. MacDiarmid, *Raucle Tongue*, II, 342.
- [10] MacDiarmid, *Raucle Tongue*, II, 342.
- [11] W. N. Herbert, *To Circumjack MacDiarmid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 124.
- [12] Harry Alan Potamkin, 'Pabst and the Social Film', *Hound and Horn*, 6.2 (Jan.-Mar. 1933), 293-305.
- [13] Moe Bragin, 'Obituary: Jewish Art Theatre', *Hound and Horn*, 5.2 (January-March 1932), 283-87; René Daumal (trans. by Vera Milanova), 'Uday Shan-kar and the Hindu Dance', *Hound and Horn*, 6.2 (January-March 1933), 288-92. Bragin also wrote under the pseudonym 'Ben Field': see Alan M. Wald, 'In Retrospect: *On Native Grounds*', *Reviews in American History*, 20 (1992), 276-88.
- [14] The *TLS* gave a short notice of this issue on 9 March 1933, which would suggest that it became available in the UK only in late February or early March.
- [15] Nathalie Duddington, 'New Russian Philosophy', *The New Atlantis*, 1.2 (January 1934), 96; Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Genethliacon for the New World Order', *The New Atlantis*, 1.2 (January 1934), 96.
- [16] Nancy Gish, *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Man and his Work* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 161-62; Harvey Oxenhorn, *Elemental Things* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1984), pp. 145-46; Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid: The Terrible Crystal* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 159-60; Herbert, *Circumjack*, p. 124.
- [17] MacDiarmid, 'Problems of Poetry To-Day', *Raucle Tongue*, II, 485-86.
- [18] H.D., 'Expiation' (May 1928), *Close Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. by James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (London: Cassell, 1998), pp. 125-30 (p.127).
- [19] Duddington, 'New Russian Philosophy'.
- [20] Anon, 'The Art of the Film' [review of *On Film Technique*, by V. I. Pudovkin], *Nation and Athenaeum*, 46 (30 November 1929), 322.
- [21] G.M. [Gorham Munson], 'Literary Chronicle, USA', *New English Weekly*, 3 (18 May 1933), 114-16; David Ramsey and Alan Calmer, 'The Marxism of Mr V. F. Calverton' (letter), *New English Weekly*, 3 (6 July 1933), 286-87.
- [22] See Whitworth, 'Three Prose Sources', and Hugh Gordon Porteous's remark that, '[w]ith a file of A. R. Orage's *The New Age* and its successor *The New English Weekly* at hand, a source-hunter may keep himself profitably occupied for years with this poet' ('Mr MacDiarmid and Dr Grieve', *TLS*, 4 February 1965, p.87).

[23] For other remarks on MacDiarmid's anti-semitism, see Neal Ascherson, 'MacDiarmid and Politics', *The Age of MacDiarmid*, ed. by P. H. Scott and A. C. Davis (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1980), pp. 224-37, and Douglas Dunn, 'Hugh MacDiarmid: Inhuman Splendours', *New Edinburgh Review*, no.52 (November 1980), 17-21.

[24] W. A. Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1923), pp. 30-31; Anton Tchekov, *The Note-books of Anton Tchekhov* trans. by S. S. Koteliansky and Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1921), pp. 80-81.

[25] Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, p. 31.

[26] It is worth noting that in June 1932, MacDiarmid repudiated an article that had described events outside Scotland as the 'brave music of a distant drum': 'Lenin and Us' (11 June 1932), *Raucle Tongue*, II, 398.

[27] René Daumal, 'Uday Shan-kar and the Hindu Dance', 289, 290.

[28] Kaikhosru Sorabji, 'Music: Uday Shankar', *New English Weekly*, 4 (2 November 1933), 65-66. I have not determined whether the un-named drummer heard by Sorabji was Vishnu Dass. MacDiarmid's poem 'At the Cenotaph' appeared in the same issue (p.70).

In Place of Dialectics: Freedom and Contingency in Russian and Scottish Fiction

Laurence Nicoll

In his recent extended essay, *The Curtain*, Milan Kundera laments what he describes as 'small context terrorism'.^[1] This phrase is intended to designate a circumstance where a literary work is undervalued, misappraised, because it is assessed only in terms of the contexts and traditions of its author's homeland: what a novel means is simply where a novel comes from. For Kundera, the prevalence of this approach produces too much literary criticism that falls upon the wrong side of a contextual disjunction:

There are two basic contexts in which a work of art may be placed: either in the history of its nation (we can call this the *small context*), or else in the supranational history of its art (the *large context*).^[2]

As Kundera has it, the more important, the more interesting and the more revealing context is the large, artistic one, for only here is a work properly seen, properly placed. The value and meaning of a text appear fully only in the international context; only when seen in terms of the history of the novel rather than as an occasion in the history of a geographical space. This is not, though, simply an instance of postmodernist self-reflexivity, for although texts do relate to other texts, they also and fundamentally relate to life. Hence Kundera further contends that artistic or aesthetic value is intimately entwined with what the novel reveals of existence. For Kundera, the novel in its 'large' context is existential because it involves 'the analysis of situations that shed light on major aspects of the human condition'.^[3] It is the analysis and expression of these existential situations, these aspects of the human condition that drive formal developments and innovations: form is always an outcome of a thematic desire. To grasp a novel's meaning is not, then, to look to the history of its homeland or the passport of its author, but to see what existential situations the novel addresses.

My intention here is to follow Kundera's supranational approach and offer a 'large context' analysis of a dominant strand of modern Scottish fiction – principally novels by Alexander Trocchi and James Kelman – by reading it alongside, and relating it to, the forms and themes of the classic Russian novel of the nineteenth century. My concerns will, though, be less about what these texts have to say about Scotland or Russia and more about what they have to say about the ways novels are constructed and the concomitant implications for how we see and frame questions of identity; how we comprehend and answer existential questions. To do this, I want to combine Kundera's large context approach with a line of thought borrowed from Gary Saul Morson. Kundera's notion that the history of the European novel is a sequence of existential analyses is both corroborated and supplemented by Morson's sophisticated readings of Russian language fiction.^[4] For Morson, the canonical writers – Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Lermontov, Turgenev, Chekhov – write against the dominant deterministic discourses, whether political, scientific or philosophical, that predominate in the nineteenth century. What drives a great deal of Russian language fiction is this desire to evade determinism and through an analysis of existential situations, posit a counter-narrative premised upon freedom and contingency. Fiction thus conceived offers an alternative to the world of laws, taxonomies and descriptions.

If Russian fiction begins with Pushkin, then Pushkin's fictions proceed from a sense of lack, of absence. In a note from 1824, Pushkin writes:

The causes slowing down our literature's progress are usually taken to be: (i) the widespread use of French and the neglect of Russian. All our writers complain of this – but who is to blame if not themselves? [...] we have as yet neither literature nor books; from childhood we have gleaned all our knowledge, all our ideas from foreign books, we have grown used to thinking in a foreign language [...] learning, politics and philosophy have not yet found expression in Russian [...].^[5]

For Pushkin, the dominance of imported fictional models and imported languages leads both to a neglect of Russian experience and Russian language, and a failure to countenance that they might themselves be sufficient for the analysis and transmission of 'learning, politics and philosophy'. However, if we reduce the nationalistic component here, what we have is an attempt to overcome a sense of estrangement. Pushkin uses 'foreign' not only to denote that a text, a way of thinking, is from elsewhere but

simultaneously that this text, this idea makes me foreign: these ideas, these novels do not represent my existential situation and nor do they speak to me in a way that is recognisably mine. I cannot see myself or hear myself within its pages. This sense of absence and estrangement from the literary dominant is, of course, familiar in the work of Alexander Trocchi, James Kelman and William McIlvanney, all of whom look to the larger European and world context for literary support and literary precedents. Whilst Pushkin bemoans the foreign, Trocchi, Kelman and McIlvanney take from it the resources either to alter domestic literature by changing its accent and focus, or escape it altogether. Trocchi's Parisian sojourn and contacts with Burroughs, Beckett and Miller opened up other technical and thematic possibilities, new modes of existential articulation, which inform the construction of his *Cain's Book*. Indeed, Trocchi's indifference to domestic fiction famously attracted Hugh MacDiarmid's opprobrium: the latter dismissing the former as 'cosmopolitan scum' during an exchange at the Edinburgh Writers' Festival.^[6] Kelman's use of world literature but particularly Russian, French, German and American is well documented in his *Some Recent Attacks* and *And the judges said ...* and William McIlvanney describes in his essay 'A Shield Against the Gorgon' how his own literary impulses were encouraged through encountering Camus:

I remember the joy of discovering Albert Camus' essay *Summer in Algiers* and realising that he was talking about my own people, with great insight and compassion. Such generously shared perceptions from other places and times were like finding out that what you had thought was a dialect was, in fact, a language and one spoken in many parts of the world. It gave me the confidence to believe that, while I was writing out of my own experience, I was also writing towards the experience of countless others. The accent might be Scottish. But the message, whether they wanted it or not, was for everybody.^[7]

Camus introduces McIlvanney to the larger context that Kundera prescribes. The existential situations that McIlvanney thought were bounded by nation are, in fact, nothing of the kind: the particular and the local are ways of reaching the universal. Moreover, Camus also brings in Russian fiction, for as Ray Davison points out, Camus's novels are 'conceived in a profound spirit of dialogue' with Dostoyevsky.^[8] It is, though, in a passage from Turgenev, that we find traces of a more profound explanation for Pushkinian resistance to 'foreign' ideas.

My good sir, you should appreciate my position. Judge for yourself what – what, if you'll be so kind – what good I might derive from the encyclopedia of Hegel? What is there in common, will you tell me, between this encyclopedia and Russian life? And how would you want it applied to our circumstances – and not only it alone, the encyclopedia, but in general German philosophy – and more than that – German science?[\[9\]](#)

Turgenev's Hamlet is not simply questioning Hegelian thought because it is German, rather he is questioning it because it typifies, is perhaps the culmination of, both systematic and abstract philosophy. Hegelian thought obliterates the local and the particular, absorbing all in the unfolding dialectic. In its phrasing, this quotation recalls a famous passage from Kierkegaard's Journals:

It is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards. Which principle, the more one thinks it through, ends exactly with the thought that temporal life can never properly be understood precisely because I can at no instant find complete rest in which to adopt the position: backwards.[\[10\]](#)

For Hegel, 'the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk'.[\[11\]](#) That is, understanding, 'wisdom', is a retrospective, a retroactive activity but for Kierkegaard and Russian fiction, life is lived forwards. Systematic thought and systematic thinkers abstract the problematic of existence, making it a general theoretical exercise rather than an individual problem of living. Hegel becomes, then, a central figure in a revolt, for as Kierkegaard has it, Hegelian thought is acutely deterministic and acutely systematic. It is this resistance to the system, to the taxonomical urge inherent in the totalising thought of the nineteenth century that Russian fiction instantiates. This concern informs the subject matter of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*:

science will teach men [...] that they have not, in fact, and never had, either will or fancy, and are no more than a sort of piano keyboard or barrel-organ cylinder; and that the laws of nature still exist on the earth, so that whatever man does he does not of his own volition but, as really goes without saying, by the laws of nature. Consequently, these laws of nature have only to be discovered, and man will no longer be responsible

for his actions, and it will become extremely easy for him to live his life. All human actions, of course, will then have to be worked out by those laws, mathematically, like a table of logarithms, and entered in the almanac; or better still, there will appear orthodox publications, something like our encyclopaedic dictionaries, in which everything will be so accurately calculated and plotted that there will no longer be any individual deeds or adventures left in the world.[\[12\]](#)

For the underground man, systematic science is irredeemably functionalist, hence the keyboard metaphor and the allusion to *Hamlet*.[\[13\]](#) Moreover, the notion of the self developed by nineteenth-century science leaves free will as an illusion: science becomes an extension of the enlightenment project attempting to solve all mysteries by treating a person as a kind of causal outcome of anterior effects with the epiphenomenal consequence that free will is rendered illusory. The free is replaced by the determined; the contingent is replaced by the necessary. In the passage above, the keyboard suggests a programmed life, without alterity, without surprise. You press this key and F sharp will always and necessarily sound. In short, the systematic, the deterministic and the descriptive leave no room for the notion of freedom. It is this notion of freedom that animates and underpins a vital strand of modern Scottish fiction. For James Kelman, 'Human freedom is so inalienable a right that it can scarcely be described as a "right" at all, it is the very essence of what it is to be a person.'[\[14\]](#) For Kelman, and for Trocchi, this sense of freedom is architectonic. Like the Russian novelists, freedom is taken as a kind of existential *a priori*. It is what it is to be. Moreover, if fiction is somehow connected with the self, if fiction is as Kundera and the Russian novelists have it – an exploration and analysis of existential problems – then freedom will be not simply a theme, but also a mechanism, a principle of construction.

A formal consequence of the resistance to deterministic discourses can be seen in the attitude to plot and more generally, in the attitudes to narrative, narrators and the position of the author. In order to undo the constraining parameters of conventional, progressive narrative modes, the notion of plot as a central connective filament is either radically altered or simply dispensed with. Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* seems at first encounter unremarkable. Stylistically it seems to incorporate some of the conventional narrative types of the early nineteenth century – travelogue, romance, picaresque tale – but this sense of the familiar is undone by the innovatory structure. Lermontov builds the novel from discrete particles, segments. There is little causal or connective momentum between these sections. The sole connection, if any, is the presence of the protagonist

Pechorin, sometimes as a physical presence, sometimes as an object of discussion. What Lermontov does, then, is unsettle that nineteenth-century narrative convention where events are ordered, clearly connected and contain no surplus, no unexplored or unutilised information. In Lermontov's text, events do not accrue around an organising plot but are, instead, driven by chance. Chance is a fundamental narrative principle because it provides a means of undoing the novel's hitherto deterministic structure and admitting the possibility of possibility.

James Kelman's novel *A Chancer* is built upon and around precisely these principles. Kelman's protagonist, Tammas, the 'chancer' of the novel's title, spends much of the narrative gambling whether at work, racetracks or casinos. The gambling motif is, of course, a central trope of the Russian novel, where it has a dual symbolic function: cards are at once an instrument of prediction, and hence of fate, but are also a means of gaming and hence of chance. Gambling and card games permeate Russian fiction from Pushkin's 'Queen of Spades' to Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler*, and supply the thematic complexity in the 'Fatalist' segment of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*.^[15] In Kelman's novel, Tammas' life is similarly built around the tensions between chance and fate, necessity and contingency. Kelman retains some of this symbolic accrual but ensures too that the thematic importance of gambling is carried over into the structure of the novel. Like Lermontov, Kelman eschews a coherent, connected narrative and instead uses a number of contiguous particles. The movement or connection between these segments is often absent and with few exceptions, each narrative particle could be moved around the novel, placed anywhere, with little or no loss of meaning. Each segment or particle is, then, contingent and this contingency feeds back into Tammas as character for he too is given to sudden changes of movement. 'It was just a change; I just felt like a change.'^[16] This locution depicts the translation of cognition into action but importantly sudden action, action which seems inexplicable when the reader attempts to posit a determining antecedent event. This movement, which is a mainstay of both *A Hero of Our Time* and *Crime and Punishment* – the latter novel teems with instances of 'suddenly' – is exemplified throughout *A Chancer*. One example is at Billy's wedding.

A moment later Alec shrugged. Anyway, they're about to stick the records on. All the Scottish stuff first but they'll be dancing after that.

Tammas nodded.

It'll be a good laugh.

Aye. I'll just have a quick pint.

You'll come up but?

Aye, course.

Okay. Billy was wondering where you were as well.

I'll just be a minute tell him.

Okay.

Tammas turned immediately, left the close, crossing in the direction of the pub, but he carried on walking beyond it. A taxi had pulled to a stop at the traffic lights; he rushed up to it and climbed in. The driver was waiting for him to speak. Sorry, he said, Shawfield, Shawfield jimmy.

...

There had been a slight flurry of snow when they boarded the bus and now, as they alighted, it was coming down quite thickly and beginning to lie.[\[17\]](#)

The irruption of chance in the narrated events is clearly seen here. As he exits the wedding and takes the taxi, Tammas suddenly alters course. Significantly, no reason is given as to why Tammas leaves the wedding: he just does. No explanation, no reason, leaves an *uncaused* event, and such motiveless and random acts populate the narrative. These sudden swerves which correspond to the gambling act are Tammas' means of challenging the inevitable, of rendering open slight avenues of possibility, and again this quest for freedom is metaphorically enacted at the races.

He reached the wall dividing the track from the enclosure and stared about. The busfare home was not essential. It was not a bad evening, mild. The busfare would give him a bet. Coupled with the cash returned him by the conductor he had enough for a twenty pence bet on the tote, twice the minimum. He could stick the whole lot on a dog. Or split it two way, 10 on the 2nd race and 10 on the 3rd. Or keep the 20 pence for the nap he had chosen; it would be racing in the 4th. Or a forecast, a 10 pence reverse forecast. Or even a place-only bet of 20 pence. No need even to dig out a winner, just one to finish in the first two. [...] The place-only bet was correct, it was the correct thing to do. And so what if the dog actually won the race [...] it would not matter, it made no difference whether it won or was second, just so long as it was placed [...] He was standing amongst the small crowd directly beneath the row of bookies, checking the form for the race, studying times and weights and

distances. Yet it would not matter. The dog he decided on would either be placed or not. What dog did not make any difference.[\[18\]](#)

In this passage, betting possibilities – signified by the repeated ‘or’ – multiply almost endlessly and point to the use of a narrative technique that Morson describes as ‘sideshadowing’. If *foreshadowing* implies a sense of necessity, of events known to come, *sideshadowing* reminds us that other possibilities were available: the future need not have been what it was.[\[19\]](#) Here, the certainty of the busfare is exchanged for the uncertainty of a possible future, but this is not a totally open future since it contains only two live possibilities: either the dog will be placed or it will not. Choice is not completely open, but dependent upon the situation in which one finds oneself. What this stresses is that the important thing is to choose, decide.

Chance stops, undoes and extinguishes the idea of narrative as necessity. It also helps generate a surplus, a kind of ghost trace of alterity. If events happen only by chance, then they need not have been, they are contingent; there were, at the time the events happened, other possibilities, other paths not taken. This is not to suggest that possibility is infinite or limitlessly multiple, only that there are other possibilities inherent in any situation. In an overly determined narrative, events are like a chambered bullet with one possible trajectory. This sense of circumscription, of being cloistered within a causally necessary sequence is attacked by Trocchi in *Cain's Book*.

I am unfortunately not concerned with the events which led up to this or that. If I were my task would be simpler. Details would take their meaning from their relation to the end and could be expanded or contracted, chosen or rejected, in terms of how they contributed to it. In all this, there is no it, and there is no startling fact or sensational event to which the mass of detail in which I find myself from day to day wallowing can be related. Thus I must go on from day to day accumulating, blindly following this or that train of thought, each in itself possessed of no more implication than a flower or a spring breeze or a molehill or a falling star or the cackle of geese.[\[20\]](#)

This passage is headlined ‘There is no story to tell’, and it is precisely the notion of an already determined monological tale, a traditional ‘story’, that Trocchi’s narrator is unsettling. There is ‘no story’ because the passage above begins by dismissing the primary agent of conventional story, causality. Here, preceding events are unimportant

and thus have no determinative purchase upon those events that are subsequent. Causality would, as the narrator indicates, provide a simpler sense of story, but it would be false. The passage, indeed the novel itself, has no purpose, no *telos*, for as the narrator states an already known end would collapse the future. Plural possibilities would solidify into a single necessity. In opposition to an ordered world governed by logic and necessity, *Cain's Book* proposes a counter principle:

Loose ends, things unrelated, nightmare journeys, cities arrived at and left, meetings, desertions, betrayals, all manner of unions, adulteries, triumphs, defeats . . . these are the facts.[\[21\]](#)

Here, the chaotic, jumbled texture of immediate experience is left unordered, 'unrelated' by abandoning formal sentence structure. Connections are absent and any relations are temporal rather than causal. Moreover, in rejecting the plot device of 'startling fact or sensational event', Trocchi coincides with the narrative intentions of Kelman but points back to what Gary Saul Morson identifies as a pivotal component of Tolstoy's conception of narrative. For Tolstoy, 'real life is lived in the small and ordinary moments. It is both prosaic and undramatic and is lived best when there is no story to tell'[\[22\]](#). Morson continues that it is precisely these small and ordinary moments that inform the famous opening statement of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. 'All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.'[\[23\]](#) For Morson, '[t]he reason that all happy families resemble each other whereas each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way is that unhappy families, like unhappy lives, are dramatic; they have a story and each story is different. But happy families and happy lives, filled with undramatic incidents, do not make a good story'.[\[24\]](#) Here 'dramatic' is used in the sense of extraordinary, tantamount to the 'sensational event' in the Trocchi passage quoted above. This resistance to extravagant plotting is also a fundamental component of James Kelman's writing. The Russian context gives an alternative resonance to this frequently cited passage from Kelman's interview with Kirsty McNeill:

I think the most ordinary person's life is fairly dramatic; all you've got to do is follow some people around and look at their existence for 24 hours, and it will be horror. It will just be horror. You don't need any beginning, middle and end at all. [...] There's no need to be saying or thinking 'When's the murder or bank robbery going to happen?'. No such abnormal event will occur – the kind of event that seems to motivate

almost all mainstream fiction whether in book or screen form. In reality these events are abnormal.[\[25\]](#)

Kelman locates drama, in the sense of the existentially vital, in the undramatic, that is the unexceptional experience of everyday life. The exceptional, the conventionally dramatic is abnormal precisely because it is not the everyday. Murders and bank robberies are not everyday events. Notice too that the everyday is not structured with a 'beginning, middle and end'; it does not have an ordered plot, an established direction or intent. To convey this lack of an ordained trajectory requires a reworking of narrative practice. Asked how he approaches the construction of narrative, Kelman responds:

I don't start up stories with ideas, I just actually begin a story from nothing, like the way a sculptor operates, I just begin from writing some words down and gradually I make a story out of it [...] I don't begin with any idea of what the story will be, I just begin and go on from there.[\[26\]](#)

The lack of an already established idea is the lack of a determining conception, an essence, a kind of blueprint or schema that events are intended to correspond to. Again this has a precedent in Dostoyevsky.

So that characters might surprise him, Dostoevsky did not determine their fate in advance. For Dostoevsky, a plot is simply the record of what happens to happen [...] In Dostoevsky [...] plot loses its inevitability [...] like real people, characters act into the open future, and not in fulfilment of an overall plan laid out at the outset.[\[27\]](#)

The sense of an open future is vital if character, life, is to be seen as free, open, alive with possibilities. Character and novelistic construction in general must, to use Morson's terminology, be a matter of process rather than product. Morson distinguishes

between the sense of life as an open process, in which actions in the present truly matter, and as a finished product, in which the future is already given. [For if] life is product, then the present moment loses its presentness and becomes something resembling the portion of a recording we happen to be watching or the page we are reading in an already written novel. All outcomes are given. Dostoevsky believed that

such a view would utterly destroy the meaningfulness of concepts essential to our humanness: choice, responsibility, and creativity.[\[28\]](#)

Morson's conception of process is a sympathetic rearticulation of a central coordinate of Russian fiction and a notion that pervades the thought of Isaiah Berlin. One of the great chroniclers of Russian thought, Berlin's liberalism and cosmopolitanism is underwritten by a commitment to this 'humanness'. Choice and responsibility are only possible, only make sense, if we are free and thus Berlin's fondness for the work of Alexander Herzen. Herzen's hostility to Hegelian providential history, that relentless teleological unfolding, is famously summed up in Herzen's statement that there is 'no libretto' to history. Instead, history is 'all improvisation [...] all extempore'.[\[29\]](#) If everything is extempore, then life and the novel resemble less the classical score with its set movements and set trajectories and methods of thematic statement and becomes instead more akin to a jazz improvisation where melody moves according to whim and the impulse of the moment.

This concern with narrative freedom brings with it a repositioning of the relationship between narrator and the implied author. Instead of occupying the space above narrated events, the narrator occupies the same plane as both character and events. As Bakhtin points out, in a Dostoyevsky novel, 'the author speaks not *about* a character, but *with* him'.[\[30\]](#) The author does not, then, take a position overlooking his character and nor does he take a position with regard to his character.

The artist is not meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say; his only job is to be an impartial witness. [...] Drawing conclusions is up to the jury, that is, the readers. My only job is to be talented, that is, to know how to distinguish important testimony from unimportant, to place my characters in the proper light and speak their language.[\[31\]](#)

Chekhov's prescription of minimal authorial interference recurs in both George Douglas Brown and James Kelman. In her introduction to the Penguin edition of *The House with the Green Shutters*, Dorothy Porter quotes Brown's statement that the author 'should be an aloof individual, if possible, stating all sides and taking none'.[\[32\]](#) Both precede the Joycean paradigm of the indifferent artist, within, behind or beyond his work.[\[33\]](#) Like Chekhov, Kelman elects to replace an overseeing narrator with an immanent one: Kelman's narrators are always situated within the narrative; the limitations and constrictions of character and place are shared with the narrator.

If you're sticking to writing as well as you can that means not interfering.
If somebody doesn't tell something to somebody else in my story, I can't
jump in and be Nabokov and say 'Tell it to me'.[\[34\]](#)

The lack of omniscience is not simply a dislike for ludic Nabokovian form but rather a purposeful omission intended to maximise character freedom and minimise the space of authorial determinism. Consider the beginning of Kelman's *A Disaffection*:

Patrick Doyle was a teacher. Gradually he had become sickened by it.
Then a very odd thing happened or was made to happen. He had been
visiting the local arts centre and having a couple of drinks, found himself
round the back of the premises for a pish, and discovered a pair of old
pipes.[\[35\]](#)

Here there is an immediately supplied subject, Patrick Doyle, and an immediately supplied context: Doyle is a sickened schoolteacher. But, this context is limited, partial. We know what Doyle *was*, but we do not know what Doyle is *now*; we do not know what has caused Doyle's 'sickness'. This explanatory absence urges the narrative forward; the reader looks for, perhaps expects, these lacunae to be filled. Instead, uncertainties multiply. The third sentence is ambiguous and could be from the point of view of the narrator or, equally, the character. What increases the epistemic gap is the conjunction 'or'. If this 'or' is the narrator, then the narrator does not know, cannot foresee or look beyond the narrated situation. If it is the character, then he is equally limited. The position of the narrator is, therefore, at once precise and at once circumspect. This form has a precedent in Dostoyevsky. Consider the opening few sentences of *Crime and Punishment*:

At the beginning of July, during a spell of exceptionally hot weather,
towards evening, a certain young man came down on to the street from
the little room he rented from some tenants in S- Lane and slowly,
almost hesitantly, he set off towards K-n Bridge.[\[36\]](#)

Here, there is the same admixture of apparent precision and ambiguity focused upon the narrator's use of 'a certain'. This ambiguity, together with numerous ellipses and elisions, gives the novel much of its recognisable climate but also suggests a subtle counter to the scientific imperative that would seek to replace the ambiguous with the certain. Human knowledge is necessarily partial, necessarily limited and our actions and decisions are

necessarily made out into an unknown and contingent future. The pretence to total knowledge or the notion that a system can somehow control, explain and accommodate all that there is or can be is, for Dostoyevsky, a falsehood and a vanity.

It is this, then, that informs the end of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov is in jail reflecting upon his crime and realises that his subjugation to the foreign, the abstract and the conceptual have seduced him from the concrete particular. His repudiation of these ideas is signalled by the narrator who states that 'In place of dialectics life has arrived'.^[37] To suggest the idea of life as an open field rather than a determined path, the novel ends not with closure but with what Morson terms 'aperture', an opening, a gesture to other possibilities other possible novels. These other novels include the work of Kelman and Trocchi, both of whom take up and reprocess the aesthetics of their avatars, in turn reframing existential questions that will be explored by other writers, other artists. This returns us to the large context I mentioned at the beginning. Describing the aesthetic of the modern novel Kundera insists that it has

nothing to do with the thinking of a scientist or a philosopher; I would even say it is purposely a-philosophic, even anti-philosophic, that is to say fiercely independent of any system of pre-conceived ideas; it does not judge; it does not proclaim truths; it questions, it marvels, it plumbs; its form is highly diverse: metaphoric, ironic, hypothetical, hyperbolic, aphoristic, droll, provocative, fanciful; and mainly it never leaves the magic circle of its characters' lives; those lives feed it and justify it.^[38]

The novel has then no sense of inevitable direction; no sense of a blueprint to which its development has to conform. It is, simply, free.

NOTES

^[1] Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 39.

^[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 35.

^[3] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

^[4] See in particular Morson's 'Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century Novel', in Malcolm V. Jones and Robin Feuer Miller (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 150-168 and his *Narrative*

and Freedom: The Shadows of Time (London: Yale University Press, 1994).

[5] *Pushkin on Literature*, ed. and trans. Tatiana Wolff (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 78.

Given the scope and nature of this piece, some simplification and conflation is necessary. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev et al. do, of course, disagree about how the novel should be written but there is nonetheless a dominant tendency, a family resemblance, in the shared movement away from the general, the abstract and the theoretical and an increased concern with the lived, the particular and the concrete. Useful here is Aileen M Kelly, *Toward Another Shore: Russian Thinkers Between Necessity and Chance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

[6] For a discussion of Trocchi and MacDiarmid, see Edwin Morgan's 'Alexander Trocchi: A Survey' in his *Crossing the Border: Essays on Scottish Literature* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), pp. 300-11, and Andrew Murray Scott (ed.), *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds: A Trocchi Reader* (Edinburgh: Polygon: 1991), pp. vii, 204-6.

[7] William McIlvanney, 'The Shield Against the Gorgon', *Surviving the Shipwreck* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1991), pp. 217-237, 230-1.

[8] Ray Davison, *Camus: The Challenge of Dostoevsky* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), p. 1.

[9] Ivan Turgenev, 'Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District' in *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, trans. Richard Freeborn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 275-300, 286-7.

[10] Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 161.

[11] G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23.

[12] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground/The Double*, trans. Jessie Coulson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 33.

[13] From *Hamlet*, III.ii:

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you/ make of me! You would
play upon me. You would seem/ to know my stops. You would sound me
from my lowest note to/ the top of my compass ... Call me what
instrument you will,/ though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.

[14] James Kelman, 'A Reading from Noam Chomsky and the Scottish Tradition in the Philosophy of Common Sense', *Edinburgh Review* 84 (1990), 46-76 (p. 51).

[15] For a discussion of the significance of gambling in the Russian novel see Jurij M. Lotman, 'Theme and Plot: The Theme of Cards and the Card Game in Russian Literature of the Nineteenth Century', *PTL* 3 (1978), 455-492.

- [16] James Kelman, *A Chancer* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1985), p. 299.
- [17] *Ibid.*, pp. 226-7.
- [18] *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.
- [19] See Morson's *Narrative and Freedom*, in particular chapters two and four, and his 'Prosaics Evolving', *The Slavic and East European Journal* 41.1 (Spring, 1997), 57-73.
- [20] Alexander Trocchi, *Cain's Book* (London: John Calder, 1992), p. 147.
- [21] *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.
- [22] Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 72.
- [23] Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Richard Pevear (London: Penguin, 2001), p.1.
- [24] Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p.72.
- [25] Kirsty McNeill, 'Interview with James Kelman', *Chapman* 57 (Summer 1989), 1-9 (p. 9).
- [26] "K is for Culture": Interview with Scottish Writer James Kelman', *Scottish Trade Union Review* 68 (January/February 1995), 24-9 (p. 26).
- [27] Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 99.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- [29] Herzen quoted in Isaiah Berlin, 'Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty', *Russian Thinkers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 82-113, 92.
- [30] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 63.
- [31] Anton Chekhov quoted in Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey* (London: Granta, 2003), p. 21.
- [32] Dorothy Porter, 'Introduction', *The House with the Green Shutters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 7-24, 17.
- [33] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 233.
- [34] McNeill, 'Interview With James Kelman', p. 7.
- [35] James Kelman, *A Disaffection* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), p. 1.
- [36] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. David McDuff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 33.
- [37] *Ibid.*, p. 630.
- [38] Kundera, *The Curtain*, p. 71.

'We will beat the landlords and the scenic sentimentalists': Neil M. Gunn and Landscape Discourse in the 'Hydro' Debates

Andrew J. Sneddon

In his introduction to *Imagined Country: Society, Culture and Environment* John Rennie Short suggests that 'there is nothing so social as our ideas about the physical environment'.^[1] Short takes issue with the received wisdom that the physical environment simply 'is' and that it is the job of the viewer, artist or writer to discover or express the ultimate truth that place may contain. In other words his focus is on the counter-proposition that human ideas about landscape are always already mediated by ideologies and aesthetic concerns that are themselves the product of discourse. Like all discourse, discourse about land has its own history; it is fluid, and it depends upon local conditions and cultural and historical difference:

Landscape has to be contextualised. The way in which people – anywhere, everywhere – understand and engage with their worlds will depend upon the specific time and place and historical conditions. [...] Even in the most scientific of western worlds, past and future will be mythologized. Sometimes the engagement will be very conscious – a way of laying down claims, of justifying and legitimising a particular place in the world – sometimes almost unconscious – part of the routine of everyday existence. Each individual holds many landscapes in tension. [...] The landscape is never inert, people engage with it, re-work it, appropriate and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, group or nation state. Operating therefore at the junction of history and politics, social relations and cultural perceptions, landscape has to be [...] 'a concept of high tension.'^[2]

Landscape, in this formulation, is a concept always in flux and always able to be shaped, re-shaped and defined by speaking positions predicated on individual and national identity as well as social and cultural circumstance. It is, in effect, an object of discourse like any other. Yet, if Barbara Bender focuses on the idea of landscape as a discursive construct, Denis E. Cosgrove goes further still and posits the notion of landscape itself as a discourse. His account begins with the historical emergence of the term 'landscape' and links it to the simultaneous development of innovative methods of representation in the visual arts, which are themselves the product of changing social and cultural conditions:

Between the early fifteenth century and late nineteenth century [...] the idea of landscape came to denote the artistic and literary representation of the visible world, the scenery (literally that which is *seen*) which is viewed by a spectator. It implied a particular sensibility, a way of experiencing and expressing feelings towards the external world, natural and man-made, and an articulation of a human relationship with it. That sensibility was closely connected to a growing dependency on the faculty of sight as the medium through which truth was to be attained: 'seeing is believing'. Significant technical innovations for representing this truth included single-point perspective and the invention of aids to sight like the microscope, telescope and camera, whose origin and development [...] can be understood historically by reference to patterns of social and productive organisations we recognise as capitalist.^[3]

It is argued that the term landscape must not be understood as denoting simply a view or vista. Rather, Cosgrove identifies the notion of landscape itself, the landscape idea, as a new way of perceiving, a new aesthetic, which is tied to and must be understood through technical innovations and social change. These innovations credit the human eye as a faculty capable of totalising the meaning of the viewed object:

Landscape is the area subtended to the eye and vision of an observer who will, at least in theory, paint it. It is to be composed for its aesthetic content and may excite a psychological response. Observed in this

painterly way, landscapes could be beautiful, sublime, monotonous or despoiled. They engage a subjective response in those who observed or experienced them. Landscape was therefore invested from outside with human meaning.^[4]

The key point here is that the landscape idea – a way of constructing and mediating ‘reality’ – actually privileges the view of the outsider *and* the outsider’s experience and sensibility. Landscapes as vistas are constructed by a remote viewer for the ocular consumption of other viewers all of whom exist in a realm external to the viewed scene. Meaning is not totalised by the lives, experiences and sensibilities of anyone happening to appear within the viewer’s field of vision, rather it is constructed from without and imposed upon the scene by the viewer. A Scottish example of Cosgrove’s thinking is the popularity of reproductions of Sir Edwin Landseer’s paintings in the late nineteenth-century. These ‘pastiche[s] of the sublime’ actually helped to create a taste for, and perpetuate the image of, a picture of the Highlands that bore little relation to the material actualities of its real inhabitants’ lives.^[5] Yet, as well as its sublime qualities, the paintings also exhibit what is presented as a commendable attention to detail. It is this very illusory realism, which is itself tied to the emergence of single-point perspective and other artistic innovations, that disguises the outsider’s outsider status. By ‘claiming realism, paintings of landscape and the idea of landscape [...] offer the illusion of affinity’ with the objects they depict.^[6]

This conclusion begs the assumption of a differently-constructed notion of landscape for those assumed to have an ‘insider’ position:

[For those inside the scene] the composition of their landscape is much more integrated and inclusive with the diurnal course of life’s events – with birth, death, festival, tragedy – all the occurrences that lock together human time and place. For the insider there is no clear separation of self from scene, subject from object. [...] The insider does not enjoy the privilege of being able to walk away from the scene as we can walk away from a framed picture or from a tourist viewpoint. [...] For the insider the landscape is unmediated by aesthetic conventions and the collective coexists within the individual.^[7]

This claim, that constructions of landscape by 'insiders' are essentially 'unmediated by aesthetic conventions' is perhaps worthy of being challenged. Yet, what Cosgrove urges is a useful contrast capable of drawing towards notions of belonging, and in extreme cases *völkishness*. It is communal work, myth, ritual, memory and history that tie the 'insider' to the land in a way that differently figures its interpretation. Cosgrove recounts the views of an outsider and an insider faced with a damaged landscape and cleared forest in Appalachia:

For the [outsider] the clearing was a chaotic and visually offensive scar of the prime majesty of the forest. For the [insider] it was a record of pioneering effort and a symbol of his family's and his nation's future. The place was invested with a personal and social meaning that had little to do with its visual form.[\[8\]](#)

In the discussion of the 'Hydro' debates that follows this perception of 'insideness' and 'outsideness' as a producer of differing discourse on the landscape of the Highlands will be closely examined. Since the late 1980s there has been a significant shift in the way Gunn's own *oeuvre* and his mode of writing has been received by critics. I broadly situate my own approach as a development of arguments first raised by Alastair McCleery, Margery Palmer McCulloch and Richard Price. All three critics explicitly and implicitly promote both the importance of Gunn's non-fiction writing as a means of understanding the novels, and his construction or articulation of an 'insider' mode of discourse.[\[9\]](#) In the case of the novel *Butcher's Broom*, for example, Price develops a persuasive thesis concerning Gunn's narrative point of view which is produced 'from the inside; it is history almost wholly from peasants' viewpoints filtered through Gunn's occasionally explicitly polemical narrator'.[\[10\]](#) In my view, such technique cannot be separated from Gunn's contribution to public debates. Just as his novels of the period were intended for a mass readership, so too is it important that his utterances on current affairs and Highland life did not appear in learned or literary periodicals but in the pages of the *Scots Magazine* and other popular or general-interest titles. The *Scots Magazine* was 'a magazine of rural and small town Scotland on the whole – as it is today – as opposed to an avant-garde magazine' and this is important precisely because it offered Gunn the chance to address his concerns to as wide an audience as possible.[\[11\]](#) Margery McCulloch argues further that Gunn's close association with the *Scots Magazine*

in the 1930s and 1940s, and his friendship with its new editor J. B. Salmond, produced

a number of penetrating articles on Scottish cultural life which have a close relationship with many of the themes being explored in his novels of the same period. In his periodical writing, as in his novels, Gunn was always concerned to relate literature to life.[\[12\]](#)

This authorial focus upon current affairs is important as Gunn, at his best, was not the fey mystic some believe.

But first it is necessary to establish the social backdrop to the debates, and anchor the discussion to the ways in which the Highlands were being interpreted in the inter-war years. The so-called 'hydro' debates were centred on a series of parliamentary bills aimed at the provision of hydro-electricity in the Highlands. These parliamentary debates were notorious for the strength of feeling they promoted both within the House of Commons and beyond, with a strong sense of frustration in many quarters at a succession of defeats and deadlocks that hindered progress. The debates began against a backdrop of severe economic depression and emigration, and concluded towards the end of 1944 within a wider social and political context focussed on national reconstruction. What the debates, and Gunn's contributions to them, reveal is that nothing less than the future image of the Highlands and Highland life was being established with various insiders and outsiders jostling for rhetorical supremacy. The following passage appears in Neil M. Gunn's article 'East to Buchan' written for the *Scots Magazine* in 1939 and describes the disused fishing boats in Fraserburgh harbour:

It was as if a fleet of them, like a school of enormous whales, had run themselves aground, become permanently stranded, and rotted. From some the planking was entirely gone, leaving the gaunt ribs for wind and salt spray to whistle through. They had all taken the ground head-on, some had slewed around, at least one had broken its back.[\[13\]](#)

The article in question is a curious piece of travel writing. It claims to be written with the intention of encouraging travellers to the Highlands to see the real place, to see the Highlands as a diverse collection of different kinds of scenery and not a mono-vista of magnificence. Gunn's simile of the abandoned fishing boats as like a skeletal school of beached whales is entirely in keeping with a contemporary discourse of Highland decline that constructed 'this old, heroic, northern land' as diseased, decaying or dying.^[14] Events such as the evacuation of St Kilda in 1930 made clear the sheer difficulty of living, and making a living, in the Highlands and Islands. One fact that preoccupied Gunn, as a Highlander and a nationalist, was the knowledge that in the ten years to 1931 the population of England and Wales had grown by two million while in Scotland there was a net shrinkage of 40,000, or one percent, largely as a result of some 392,000 émigrés.^[15] In the article '...and Then Rebuild It', also written in 1939, Gunn dryly quoted from James A. Bowie's *The Future of Scotland*: 'Unless heroic measures are taken, there is every indication that the Highlands will become the Sahara of Scotland'.^[16] This new and grim realism began to be expressed as a critique of traditional, largely Romantic or Victorian, constructions of the majesty of the Highlands and Gunn himself had complained such hyperbole smacked of a 'lack of reality, of exact description, that flatters our vague emotions at the expense of our sight and insight'.^[17] Indeed, in a 1937 article he had already gone a step further:

Ah! The romantic highlands, the aesthetic appeal of the glens, the bens and the heroes, the blue waves rolling by Barra and all the haunted isles; [...] Is it too much to hope that some day this sort of thing may stick in our gullets, that we shall be roused to make it an indictable offence? This parodying of great beauty by the sentimentalists who think factory work ungenteeel should fill us, not with laughter, but with shame.^[18]

In many circles the new emptiness of the Highlands was considered its best asset. If it was to have a future it would be either as a playground for the rich and landed classes or simply as a 'clean' space devoid of the smog and crime of the industrial heartlands. Gunn had already summarized this position in another piece of strange travel writing, 'Caithness and Sutherland', in 1935. Of the shooting and fishing economy that was to be encouraged he complained archly: 'After sheep, deer; and after deer; tourists. It is the ascending order of our age of

progress'.^[19] This rather embittered response can be explained by the lack of drive and imagination Gunn perceived in those charged with improving the lot of the Highlands. In another piece for the *Scots Magazine* in 1937 he appears almost to have been driven to despair:

The best that Inverness Town Council could suggest the other night at a public meeting was tourism as the solution of all our ills, and the Highlands no longer as a brain or a heart or a creative force but as 'a lung' – a lung freed from all the taint of industrialism, so that folk from south of the Highland line could clamber into its emptiness to breathe. Well, it is not enough. In the face of the realities of the situation I find it impossible, for example, to blame the Lochaber men who want work and believe they will find it in the proposed factories of the Caledonian Power Scheme.^[20]

The Caledonian Power Scheme was also debated at length by Gunn in the one-act play *Hail, Caledonian!* which appeared in the *Scots Magazine* in May 1938. The play is an interesting dramatisation of the differing views on the proposed Hydro scheme offered by three Highlanders, an Irishman and an Englishman during a heated barroom debate. I make reference to it below and show how it connects to the rhetoric of the parliamentary debates.

The Independent Labour Party firebrand, and publisher of the Socialist journal *Forward*, Tom Johnston, was finally persuaded by Churchill to accept the position of Secretary of State for Scotland in the wartime coalition government in February 1941.^[21] Johnston believed that the best means of improving the lot of the working people of Scotland in general, and the Highlanders in particular, lay in the expansion of Scotland's industrial capacity. His fallow years out of office in the mid to late 1930s saw him develop a great interest in the vast American Hydro-Electric schemes such as the works undertaken by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Indeed, Johnston's account of his involvement in Scotland's Hydro-electric programme opens with the following epigraph:

No longer do men look upon poverty as inevitable, nor think that drudgery, disease, filth, famine, floods, and physical exhaustion are visitations of the devil or punishment by a deity. Here is the

central fact with which statesmanship tomorrow must contend.^[22]

Those words were written by David Lillenthal, the director of the Tennessee Valley Authority and are followed by a second, brief and rather mournful epigraph by one Wendell Wilkie billed as the 'chief opponent of the TVA': 'It doesn't matter what I think anymore. You can't tear those dams down.'^[23] The point, it would seem, was for Johnston to begin his narrative with two interventions that fixed his account within a context of both discursive struggle and victory. But, the epigraphs also align these projects with a kind of post-enlightenment rationalism attributed to the ordinary citizen. Such technological improvement of the land becomes necessary because the citizen-subject is no longer willing or able to accept the misery and deprivation that would previously have been accepted as God's will. Yet, the problem was that the British House of Commons had an established track record of resisting the electrification of the Highlands.^[24] No fewer than six different Bills had been brought before Parliament since 1929 seeking monopoly rights to Hydro-Electric development for the State. All were defeated.^[25] The last of those was the Grampian Electricity Supply Order Bill of September 1941.^[26]

Speaking in support of the Bill, the London-based Conservative MP for Streatham, David Robertson, sought to ameliorate concerns about the potential damage the scheme might cause in Glen Affric:

I have taken some moving pictures of it which many honourable members have seen, showing not only the parts which it is proposed to develop but of works which the same company have done among a similar chain of lochs in Perthshire. I submit that the amenities argument is destroyed by these pictures. [The] camera does not lie [...]. The pictures show crofter's house after crofter's house lying in a state of decay. [...] As a member of a Highland family, I can assure the Members that they do not all want to go away. [...] It is a cruel fate that people born in such a beautiful place should have to go away, and particularly cruel in the case of the Highland folk, who have great imaginative capacity, and who never lose sight of the glens among which they were born. Even when looking at a brick wall in Partick or

Philadelphia they never lose those precious engravings on their youthful minds. I have lived among exiles. I am the son of an exile, and I know something of their sadness [...].[\[27\]](#)

Robertson intervened at exactly this point in the debate because the weighing of beauty, often termed amenity, against utility was the focus of opposition to these local schemes. This quandary, the problem of valuing landscape aesthetically against land use practicalities, rears its head over and over again, for example in these words spoken by Sir Edward Keeling, Conservative MP for Twickenham: 'The [...] misconception is that the issue is one of beauty against utility. I am not opposing the Bill mainly because of its effect on amenities'.[\[28\]](#) Yet, the fact remains that the debates were notorious for English MPs regularly voting to defeat the Bills based on aesthetic considerations and for their collusion with (often Scottish Lowland) MPs representing coal-mining areas or other vested interests. A prominent example may be found in the words of Ian Campbell Hannah, the Conservative MP for the industrial and mining town of Bilston in the West Midlands:

Close by Glen Affric there is the most mysterious lake in all the world, and the Loch Ness Monster has been most patriotically re-appearing during the last few days. Nobody knows what the Loch Ness Monster is. It may have been a contemporary of St Columba or it may have been the ancestor of such an animal. But whether the Loch Ness Monster is a prehistoric animal, or whatever he may be he is one of the great problems of the present time. We have got to fire the American nation with the idea of solving this problem, and then dollars will flow into the Highlands as water flows over a mill stream. [But] we are not going to get that type of thing if we make Glen Affric a mass of concrete, billowing smoke, girders and that kind of thing.[\[29\]](#)

On one level, Hannah's rhetoric is purely comical and theatrical. Yet, the very act of making light of the whole Hydro issue appears at the very least patronisingly ironic, if not strategically belittling in its mirthful discussion of Scotland's famously watery denizen. What Hannah actually does is to advocate the status quo via the scenic route; he takes a long way round his own discussion to conjure up an image of a picturesque highland vista for visitors, and advocates no change and

no investment in the people who live there. We might begin to glean that what actually begins to divide the speakers into camps is not whether they were for or against the Hydro scheme, but rather whether they understood themselves to be speaking as ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’, to use Cosgrove’s formulation.

It is environmental impact that David Kirkwood, ILP Member for the Dumbarton Burghs, clearly had in mind when he urged MPs to reject the Grampian Bill, and he has that much in common with Hannah. He cited Kinlochleven, the site of Scotland’s first large Hydro scheme which was completed in 1906 and privately operated by British Aluminium:

I ask Members to go to Kinlochleven and see the wooden shanties two stories high. [...] There is no consideration given to amenities – the two great iron chimneys, two great heaps of dross, mud flung all over the place, pipes coming down the beautiful hillside, which is all denuded of plants, trees and every kind of vegetation. [...] Do you mean to tell me that the individuals behind this scheme are more interested in my native land than the people who are in it?[\[30\]](#)

Here, the passage concludes with an appeal to the authority of his own discourse as originating from ‘inside’. Looking back at Robertson’s speech above one can see similar claims to the authority of ‘insiderness’ being made: ‘I have lived among exiles. I am the son of an exile, and I know something of their sadness.’ Yet, as both Robertson’s and Kirkwood’s speeches in this debate make clear, the question of preserving ‘amenity’ in the parliamentary debates meant something between conserving natural beauty and maintaining the landscape in its current form: those two things might be complimentary but they are not the same. In the 1943 debates the meaning of this word amenity was actually broadened, some might say cynically, as a way of forcing the whole project through.[\[31\]](#) This issue of how the perceived beauty of the Highland landscape was valued, and by whom, was one of the key targets of Gunn’s ‘Socratic method’ of dramatising the debates in the form of a pub argument in *Hail, Caledonian!*[\[32\]](#) In the following extract Hector, a Highlander with rather conservative views, is in conversation with Ewan, a practically-minded Highland Socialist, and accuses him of wanting to destroy the natural beauty of the place. Pat, a plain-speaking Irishman who often sides with Ewan in the debates, makes a key intervention:

Hector:

You are prepared to turn the Highland into an industrial area with all the horrors of industrialism, you are prepared to destroy the beauties of your country, you are prepared to desecrate the gloopy that has been given to you – why? So that a big industrial combine may make profits. You would sell your land and your people into slavery, you would destroy a beauty you don't understand, to satisfy what you flatter yourself is a sense of reality. Thank God, some of us have a different conception of reality, a conception deep and strong enough to have appealed to the consciences of the majority –

Pat:

- Of Englishmen.[\[33\]](#)

That amenity was connected first and foremost with natural beauty in the minds of objectors to Hydro development is a topic with considerable roots. Indeed, one can go all the way back to the report submitted to the Board of Trade in 1921 by Sir John Snell's Water Power Resources Committee:

Even in regard to amenities, works required for the development of a water power scheme need not be harmful. In some cases, the works required may actually be the cause, direct or indirect, of an improvement in conditions. We submit there is nothing inherently unsightly about a dam. [...] Sometimes the land is swampy or otherwise of poor quality, and the permanent flooding of it would materially improve the aspect.[\[34\]](#)

It can be seen that the authors of the Snell report were somewhat defensive in their response to the 'amenity' question and that in an attempt to circumvent objectors they were obliged to couch their language in the rhetoric of improvement. Despite those attempts, and despite the subsequent best efforts of the advocates of Hydro-electrical development at the time of the Grampian Bill, the Highlands appeared doomed to continue to languish. Gunn's own response to the amenity question was partly elaborated in *Hail, Caledonian!* At the same time as Inverness town council were considering the preservation of an idealised

landscape in perpetuity for visitors, the Council was being openly mocked for the real squalor of Inverness itself:

Ewan [to Hector]:

You would have everyone's sympathy if you could make a out a case. But why be so vague [in your definition of amenity] that a Minister of the Government can make a joke about your needing a spate to clean out your sewage? That sort of amenity, he said, amidst the laughter of the Commons, that Inverness Town Council enjoy to- day – and that the promoters of the Bill wished to destroy![\[35\]](#)

Whatever the actual merits of the contested 'amenity' question, Johnston and other advocates of Hydro schemes saw their Parliamentary defeats as the machinations of vested interests, and the naïve doings of opponents of progress who wanted to keep the Highlands backward for their own selfish reasons. Following hot on the heels of the defeat of the local Grampian scheme in September 1941, Johnston appointed a committee under Lord Cooper in October 1941, to investigate the feasibility of a massive scheme of Hydro-Electrical power generation in what would become known as the North of Scotland District. The report this committee produced in August 1942 literally changed the political and physical landscape of the Highlands. The Cooper report noted that the status quo was simply not an option. Its authors stated that a new sense of realism regarding the problems of Highland decline must be summoned and that the vexed question of amenity must be confronted head on. The amenity question, they said, 'had been used purely as a makeweight in an opposition truly founded upon other grounds' and that what was truly 'apprehended by the extremist advocates of amenity' was simply change rather than damage.[\[36\]](#) Furthermore, the Cooper Report brought into stark, unparliamentary language the real plight faced by the Highlands:

If it is desired to preserve the natural features of the Highlands unchanged in all time coming for the benefit of those holiday-makers who wish to contemplate them in their natural state during the comparatively brief season imposed by the climactic conditions, then the logical outcome of such an aesthetic policy

would be to condemn the greater part of the area into a national park and to sterilize it in perpetuity, providing a few 'reservations' in which the dwindling remnants of the native population could for a time continue to reside before they become extinct.[\[37\]](#)

Almost as soon as the report was published in December 1942 Johnston had brought forward a Bill, the Hydro-Electric Development (Scotland) Bill, which accepted the terms of the report as its own framing language. In other words, the report which had dismissed the 'amenity' question as a makeweight used by extremists and vested interests set the tone and limit of subsequent debate, both inside and outside parliament. When the Bill itself was published it was met with widespread opposition. Standing on the floor of Parliament at the Bill's second reading, in February 1943, Johnston chose to go on the offensive and selected the vexed issue of amenity as the ground on which he would fight:

There are people, of course, who regard any large-scale industry in the Highlands as anathema – something approaching the desecration of the Garden of Eden. [...] Everybody is for amenity these days, and I am glad of it. [...] But, occasionally, I could fain wish that some of the people who clamour for the preservation of amenities would remember there are amenities other than landscape ones. For the people who live in the grandeur and majesty of the Highlands, we could fain wish – some of us – that the definition of the word was widened and made more comprehensive. To some people, I gather, amenity means the provision of bathrooms in hotels marked by four stars in the automobile guidebooks, with a few poverty-stricken natives in squalor amid picturesque reservations, much as the disappearing red races live in some parts of America. [...] For my part, I should like to go from this place to offer some of the amenities of life to the peasant, his wife, his family. The amenities of civilization have largely passed by the class from which Robert Burns sprang. I will join with anybody in preventing [...] signs advertising somebody's beer or soap on the mountainside at Sligachan, but my idea of amenity is not that it should begin about the 12th August and last until the deer stalking and salmon fishing seasons are over. And the chief

amenity I should like to see carried into the life of the North of Scotland is the amenity of social security, the right to work and the amenity which derives from a useful day in the world. But there need be and there ought to be no disfigurement or desecration of our beautiful scenery, either by the Hydro works or by industries which we hope will be attracted to the Highlands.[\[38\]](#)

Firstly, and most importantly, Johnston's rhetoric actually amplifies the Cooper Report's point about the conditions of the Highlanders with its bald assertion that they are, as it were, deprived of agency and reduced to the status of 'picturesque' tableau or backdrop in the mind's eye of those to whom the Highlands is frequently, and increasingly, assumed to belong: the tourist. It is perfectly obvious that Johnston has in his sights speakers like Mr. Hannah of Bilston whose mocking 'concern' for the Highlands extends only to its preservation in perpetuity as a vista.

Johnston also invokes Burns in this case as a kind of exemplar of the potential of the ordinary Scot. But Burns had appeared elsewhere in the debates as a way of defeating the amenity argument. Another Labour member, Rev. Barr of Coatbridge, stood and reminded the House about the ill-founded fears a previous Hydro scheme in Galloway provoked:

[Barr cited the concerns about the] large numbers of lochs, rivers and streams that would be dried up. It was said the river beds would be dry, and that disease would break out; that the salmon fishing would be seriously impaired, that the amenities of the land of Robert Burns would be destroyed, that the beauty of the banks of the Doon would wither and die. The works were carried out, but river Doon still runs in ample flood as it falls into the firth of Clyde below Ayr, and 'The banks and braes O' Bonnie Doon still bloom sae fresh and fair.'[\[39\]](#)

What Rev. Barr was rather cleverly doing was to use Burns as an accepted authority on that landscape. Opponents of the Hydro are being invited to disagree not just with his opinion but with Burns' own description of the place. A

second example of the weight which skilful allusions could lend to the pro-Hydro camp can be seen in another part of Barr's speech:

Finally, let me say that depopulation is not beauty. There is no beauty in a deserted village. [...] There is no beauty for me in a deer forest. The Highland Clearances did not improve the beauty of the Highlands. Our Highland overlords made their glens a wilderness and they called it beauty, now they challenge us to disturb their beauty.[\[40\]](#)

Anyone in the House that day with an interest in Scottish nationalism will have had their ears pricked by that. Tacitus' purported record of the Caledonian King Calgacus' speech of defiance against the Roman war machine in the *Agricola* was a relatively recent discovery by nationalists who rallied to it as an emblem of their own native resistance. Calgacus was reported to have said 'To plunder, to slaughter, to steal – these things they misname Empire, they make a desolation and they call it peace.'[\[41\]](#) There is a very distinct echo of this in Barr's rousing last words and it is difficult to believe that it is purely coincidental. His rhetoric cleverly sides the advocates of the Hydro with the native resistance of the warriors of the Caledonian forests. To vote for the Hydro was to fight for freedom and against tyranny. Barr's use of the words 'wilderness' and 'beauty' are also clearly heavily loaded, here they have a negative connotation that one is invited to agree is disagreeable.

Johnston's stand, supported by Labour members and many Conservatives alike, against the advocates of amenity, effectively finished the job that the Cooper report had begun. Its opponents were rhetorically isolated as aesthetes, as ruin-bibbers, as enemies of the working man and of progress itself. To oppose the Hydro was to condemn the Highlanders to the sterile reservation doom the Cooper report had predicted. Later in the same debate Mr Pethick-Lawrence, the MP for Edinburgh East, stood and supported the Bill with the words 'We must accept the industrial development of the Highlands in order to preserve the Highlands'.[\[42\]](#) Those words hit home as a wonderfully economical summary of the debate and of the prevailing mood of the commons. Yet, there continued to be voices of dissent both inside and outside the debating chamber.

One vitriolic naysayer was the Liberal MP and Celticist Professor Gruffydd, who represented the University of Wales seat. Again, as with Johnston, it is worth looking in some detail at the tone and form of his speech:

What does 'preservation of the Highlands' mean? There was a time when 'preserving the Highlands' meant denuding them of men and women in order to place deer there instead. The words still, to my ear, bear a very sinister sound. [...] A deadlier method of destroying what remains of Highland life I cannot conceive. It is a method which will end forever the life and civilisation of the Highlands, and substitute for them not even the life and civilisation of the Connemara cabin; it will be the life and civilisation of the Dublin slum. [This Bill] will not bring back there these people who speak the Gaelic tongue and whose history, language and literature created a new romance for the whole of Europe during the nineteenth century. Almost the last pibroch has been played through the glens and almost the last coronach has lamented the sons who will no more return from their world-wide diaspora in lands beyond the sea. We can no longer rebuild the clachans of the Highlands; let us take heed lest we plant there instead the cities of the plain.[\[43\]](#)

His rhetoric alludes to Sodom and Gomorrah, of course, but what is of specific interest here is the speaker's attempt at displaying his 'insider' credentials. The use of the words 'pibroch', 'coronach' and 'clachans' in particular seem to be deployed in an attempt at self-authentication. Yet, what rings out from his contribution is the rather pessimistic view that nothing can be done, that Highland culture is doomed to disappear, and that it would be better to leave the Highlands to their empty fate rather than 'plant there instead' the 'Dublin slum' and the 'cities of the plain'. Gruffydd's solution is simply the rather fatalistic Celticism of the Twilight, and, it must be said, an inevitable if inadvertent collusion with the forces of conservatism that demand the maintenance of the status quo. But such interventions were becoming scarce as the debates developed. An earlier appeal to the Twilight had received a stinging rebuke from Malcolm MacMillan, Labour member for the Western Isles:

We must not base opposition to practical schemes of this kind on that sort of sentimental Celtic twilightism. I get people writing from places like Surrey up to me in the western isles [...] hoping that we shall have regard to the amenities, as though we ourselves were not completely cognisant of our duty to the preservation of the beauty spots of our country. That sentimental obstruction must be brushed aside. Most of those who indulge in it do not live in the Highlands, and would not live there, I fancy.[\[44\]](#)

Again, what this riposte foregrounds is the 'insider' status of the speaker as a source of authority that validates his opinion over those others from outside. Yet, it is also a response that emphasises the stark disjunction between practical measures for improvement and a whimsical or aesthetic interpretation of what the Highlands should be like. Indeed, it might plausibly be argued that such views held by Celticists like Gruffydd, and ascribed to the Twilight by its critics like Macmillan, partly account for Gunn's attempts to rhetorically distance himself from it in the early part of his career, and may well account for his bemused and rather hurt response to Hugh MacDiarmid's accusation that he was drowning in twilight mysticism himself.[\[45\]](#)

Despite initial hostility to the Bill, and indeed despite continued rumblings about the Bill and its rather draconian legal machinery outside parliament, it was eventually passed at its third reading, without even the necessity for a vote, on 27 May 1943. The resulting Act of Parliament created the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board which went on to create the assets of 11 vast Hydro-power schemes in Glen Affric, on the Tay, the Conon valley, the Isle of Harris, Foyers on the south shore of Loch Ness, Glen Garry, the Tummel, the Rivers Shin and Oykel, the lochs Lomond, Fyne, Awe and Etive, Storr on Skye, Glendoe as well as acquiring the earlier Galloway, Lanark, Kinlochleven and Lochaber schemes originally operated by private firms. The board also undertook the erection of electrical transmission lines throughout the Highlands so that power could be conveyed from one district to the next, to the lowlands and ultimately to the national grid. All of these massive constructional schemes changed the landscape – lochans were flooded to create huge reservoirs, the levels of existing lochs were raised by damming to create heads of water powerful enough to drive turbines, rivers were diverted through tunnels and tailraces. Some

projects proceeded with very little objection, but others like that around Pitlochry, and what was originally debated as the Grampian scheme in Glen Affric, continued to cause great controversy and the opposition to the works was noisy and well-orchestrated. What is clear is that a certain amount of legitimate concern and grievance from Highlanders affected by the constructional schemes was dismissed by Johnston in his memoir as 'streams of vituperation from the letters-to-the-editor-brigade'.^[46] This was too harsh, as was his childish and dismissive joke about traditional Highland reluctance to accept the artifacts and methods of modernity such as General Wade's roads, hedges, winnowing machinery and the potato.^[47] Such humour reinforces the rhetorical positioning of Johnston's vision as one of post-enlightenment rationalism, but ironically it also reinforces his own non-Highland, outsider status. Johnston simply rearticulates traditional prejudices about Highland backwardness in established tone and language. It is the rhetoric of forced improvement so familiar to Highlanders from the time of the clearances, and put into the mouth of Mr. Falcon, the Laird's factor, by Gunn in *Butcher's Broom*:

'It is intolerable that we should have to contemplate trouble from them. Are we not bettering the estate, are we not civilizing the people, rousing them out of their sloth, aren't we going to make this instead of a peat bog a great productive area for feeding England with wool and mutton? Isn't his lordship putting his own money against the governments to construct roads and bridges? [...] Do you expect us to wipe their – their noses?'^[48]

But, for all that, there was, perhaps, a narrative of genuine improvement that could be explained persuasively by a writer in tune with Highland sensibilities. Gunn, as has been shown, had been an outspoken advocate of the Hydro schemes as early as the mid 1930s. His travel book *Off in A Boat* of 1938, for example, contained the following impressions following a visit to Fort William:

How great the change [since the defeat at Glencoe]! Though hardly yet a suggestion of what will be when the Highlands develop their natural industries through water power. [We] will beat the landlords and the scenic sentimentalists. And if it does not go well with the workers after that, the workers will fight. There will never again be a repetition of the defeatism of the

Clearances. The folk will come into their own. God hurry the merry day![\[49\]](#)

This is a very early intervention along the lines of the debates of the 1940s in which many advocates of the Hydro schemes saw agitation for such improvements as striking a blow against the aesthetic valuations of the Highlands detrimental to Highlanders themselves, and as a blow against tyranny and oppression. Another example, more directly relevant to the Hydro debates of the 1940s, can be found in his novel *The Serpent*, published in 1943. In this extract a Highland autodidact, known as the Philosopher, is conversing with an elderly shepherd. The men are discussing the familiar theme of Highland economic decline and depopulation, its causes and possible solutions:

‘If you ask any man what is the reason for the decline in our land, he will tell you that folk will not live on porridge and milk as they used to do; in short, he’ll tell you that the causes are economic. It’s the same with rabbits. Too many of them, not enough grass, liver disease. It will be time enough for man to despise the rabbit’s economics when he arranges his own in a more intelligent way.’

‘And do you think the resources are here?’

‘We have hardly touched them yet. What do you think all these big fellows are trying to get hold of Highland Hydro-electric power for? The machine is finding out our land. The machine has taken away, the machine will give, blessed be the machine!’

As the Philosopher smiled the Shepherd did not quite know what to make of him. The Philosopher always excited his mind, for about him there still lingered a memory of strange deeds, of the coils of the serpent in mystery and prophecy.[\[50\]](#)

The Philosopher alludes to a typically Lawrentian construction of mechanised modernity, yet his tone is to a degree sarcastic and ironic. Tom is a man who has already discovered the value and strategic application of ‘his intellectual power, his searching gift for humour’ and does not spare these talents when holding forth on political subjects.[\[51\]](#) He does not actually fear that all will become slaves to the machine’s endlessly turning gears. Rather, he believes that the conditions of modernity afford new opportunities, a new way of ordering Highland

affairs so that Highland life will, as he says, 'come back, but not in the old way'.^[52] In July 1943 Gunn contributed an article to *SMT Magazine* on the contemporary prospects of the Black Isle district where he was then residing:

The vicissitudes of Cromarty itself have been sufficiently dramatic to make the suggestion in the recent Cooper Report on Hydro-Electricity in the Highlands, that Cromarty should again become an important port, quite in character with its past history.^[53]

Nevertheless, it is perhaps easier to make such points through the discourse of a fictional character such as Tom the Philosopher. Indeed, he, at times, actually gets very close to, and serves as a sort of exemplar for, the kind of action Gunn himself advocated as a way of solving the problems of the Highlands:

I should like to see new energy and new impetus provided by the Highlanders themselves, by those who derive from the old traditions, the old race, so that what was distinctive and fine in our culture, our ways of life and behaviour, might continue. But vital statistics show that this will have to be done soon or it will be too late. Emigration is a remorseless way of getting rid of the best. And a dwindling population adds ever new ruins to the old ruins in the glens.^[54]

In yet another link Gunn refers to a culture he feels he shares in, it is 'ours', though whether he feels this potential extends beyond his Glen, the Highlands or indeed Scotland is not directly addressed. However, he did use his own literary fame and position as a recognised spokesperson for the Highlands, as an accepted voice of the 'insider', to massage ongoing concerns about the construction schemes which continued well into the 1950s and 1960s. In February 1956, for example, a photograph of his smiling visage appeared in an article in *Scottish Field* above the legend 'Neil Gunn lives in Cannich [...] at the foot of Glen Affric, where a Hydro-electric scheme has made many changes in the glen'.^[55] In this article Gunn averred:

This Glen had its evictions like the rest, the old bitter story of depopulation and decay. But a few weeks ago a class room had

to be added to the school [...] A study of what has taken place in all its ramifications, from the production of electric light and power to the creation of a new community, from old discussion about destroying the beauty of the Highlands, to new discussions about starting up a general merchant's shop, would be potent enough to provide ample material for the presentation of a social thesis by any studious Scot.

[It] has been happening on such a scale that districts here and there have been affected by these two sources of employment alone, the generating of electricity and the growing of trees, within which lies the possibility of many types of new light industries suitable to the glens, not to mention part-time employment for crofters. But already, whether direct employment is given or not, at least over a vast and ever increasing area electric light and power have cast a rare brightness upon what are called the amenities of life – more colloquially, the elimination of drudgery and dirt.[\[56\]](#)

Of particular interest here is the repetition of the enlightenment of the Hydro works having resulted in a 'rare brightness upon what are called the amenities of life', which has, it is claimed resulted in increased standards of living and opportunity. Here we see that the meaning of the term amenity has completed its transition from the realm of aesthetics and now fully resides in the realm of utility. While, as has been argued, the Hydro works may be seen as a sort of post-enlightenment rationalism in the rhetoric of Johnston and his associates, the projects were interpreted during the debates as a quite literally illuminating:

I wish [opponents] to see some of these beautiful stretches of country and valleys in the Highlands of Scotland. You would say that you had never seen country so beautiful, but suddenly there would come to your mind the fact that something was lacking – people. [...] Spread the light. Do not ask whether it will pay. [...] Give the people light and they will come back.[\[57\]](#)

Those words formed part of the speech in support of the Bill made by Willie Henderson, the notorious Red Clydesider and Communist MP for Fife West.

What is interesting about these debates is just how closely the speakers got the rhetoric of enlightenment rationalism and electrical illumination to fit together. Amongst the other examples that could be cited, is one from Gunn in 1950, and is from a more whimsical piece he wrote for the *Glasgow Herald* under the title 'Giants and Distant Bells'. As in his last example he is writing about the Glen Cannich scheme, one of the more vexed projects which continued to cause anxiety throughout its construction phase:

[T]he first glimpse of the electric lights on and around the high dam wall, designed to trap the waters of Loch Mullardoch, had, I must confess, a something in keeping with the daily scene. It was giant's work. Human beings looked like pygmies and some of them seemed to be wandering around with that peculiar [motion] which, in our ignorance, we associate with ants. [We later saw] across the water a nest of lights and a black hole: the beginning of a tunnel through the mountains. On the Affric side we had stopped and watched the little electric train as it disappeared into the earth. [...] Somewhere in the core of the mountains the two black holes would meet with the accuracy for which ants and bees and a few insects who operate upon caterpillars have long been famous. [\[58\]](#)

Yet, there is also something more in the arc of Gunn's similes. Gunn is impressed not just by the mind-boggling scale of the project which reduces human beings first to pygmy and then ant scale. On the contrary, the projects make humans look as industrious, organized and demanding of themselves as ants are. This reduction in scale actually brings about an ennobling that impresses because of its proximity to the communal behaviour of insects and its similarity to natural cooperation. Elsewhere in the same piece Gunn also makes a case for the lamps and giant scale 'fitting' with folk mythology relating to fairies and giants. Gunn 'domesticates' the Hydro project, he integrates this sublime vista with traditional ways of apprehending place through the eyes of his Highlanders. It is a way of bringing these iconic landscapes of modernity, the insider position and his own nationalist rhetoric together.

NOTES

[1] John Rennie Short, *Imagined Country: Society, Culture and Environment* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. xviii.

[2] Barbara Bender, 'Introduction: Landscape Meaning and Action' in *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1993), 1-17, p.1. Bender quotes the phrase 'a concept of high tension' from F. Inglis, 'Nation and Community: A Landscape and its Morality', *The Sociological Review* 25 (1977): 489-513.

[3] Denis E. Cosgrove, [1984] *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 2nd edn, (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 9. The quotation is taken from the new introduction to the 1998 paperback edition.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 232-3. Much the same point about Landseer was made in Professor Murdo MacDonald's plenary address to the delegates of the University of Stirling's *The Lie of the Land: Scottish Landscape and Culture* conference on 28th July 2006. To the best of my knowledge, Professor MacDonald's comments on this topic have not yet appeared in print. Gunn, too, was sensitive to such nuanced views of cultural representations of the Highlands. In the serial novel *The Poaching at Grianan* the narration describes the aftermath of a shooting incident as 'a scene not unlike a Landseer composition seen in a nightmare.' Neil M. Gunn, *The Poaching at Grianan* (Merchiston Publishing: Edinburgh, 2005), p. 126. The novel was originally published in *Scots Magazine* between September 1929 and May 1930 in issues 11.6 to 13.2.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] For Gunn's journalism and occasional pieces see Alastair McCleery, ed., *Landscape and Light: Essays by Neil M. Gunn* (Aberdeen University Press: Aberdeen, 1987) and Margery McCulloch, ed., *The Man Who Came Back: Essays and Short Stories by Neil M. Gunn* (Polygon: Edinburgh, 1991). Richard Price's book-length study is also invaluable: *The Fabulous Matter of Fact: The Poetics of Neil M. Gunn* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1991).

[10] Richard Price, 'Whose History, Which Novel?', in *Scottish Literary Journal* 24.2 (November 1997): 85 -102, p.101.

[11] Margery Palmer McCulloch, 'Scottish Renaissance Periodicals: Work in Progress Revisited', in Alastair McCleery, ed., *Scottish Literary Periodicals*

(Merchiston Publishing: Edinburgh, 1998), pp. 29-53, p. 43.

[12] Margery McCulloch, 'Neil M Gunn: Tradition and the Essence of Nationalism', in *Cencrastus* 26 (Summer 1987): 29-33, p. 29.

[13] Neil M. Gunn, 'East to Buchan' in *Landscape and Light*, pp. 35-9 (p.38). The piece originally appeared in *Scots Magazine* 31 (1939).

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[15] Neil M Gunn, '...and then Rebuild It', in *Landscape and Light*, pp.152-7, p.153. First published in *Scots Magazine* 32 (Dec 1939): 173-8.

[16] Gunn, '...and then Rebuild It', p. 155.

[17] Neil M. Gunn, 'Caithness and Sutherland' in *Landscape and Light*, pp. 25-34. Originally published in G. S. Moncrieff, ed., *Scottish Country* (Edinburgh: Wishart Books, 1935), pp. 59-76.

[18] 'A Visitor from Denmark', in *Landscape and Light*, pp.170-4 (p.174). Originally in *Scots Magazine* 27 (May 1937): 96-101.

[19] Gunn, 'Caithness and Sutherland', p. 34

[20] Neil M. Gunn, "'Gentlemen – The Tourist!": The New Highland Toast', *Scots Magazine* 26.6 (March 1937): 410-5, p. 415.

[21] Johnston's own account of events leading to this appointment is described in detail in his memoir *Memories* (London: Collins, 1952).

[22] Johnston, *Memories*, p. 174.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 174.

[24] Johnston's biographer makes the point that he imagined Hydro-electric development would bring about 'a renaissance in the heart of "Scotia"' and that his personal enthusiasm for 'the Hydro' 'did much to relieve the frustrations of a Scottish public anxious about delays and hiccups in [the] previous attempts to electrify the Highlands.' See Graham Walter's *Thomas Johnston* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p.158.

[25] The source for the comment about the six defeated schemes is Johnston's own speech introducing the 2nd Reading of the Hydro-Electric (Development) Scotland Bill on the 24th February 1943. See *Parliamentary Proceedings*, Volume 387/34, column 180.

[26] It would be fair to allow that several of the six Bills referred to small-scale, often single-glen, proposals that might be considered as purely 'local' affairs. Nonetheless, such was the law surrounding electrical generation that an Act of Parliament was required for projects whereby generation was carried out by the State rather than by private firms if and when the intention was to supply the 'national grid'. Scotland had had private Hydro-electrical generating plants in

operation since at least 1906 (see Wood, 2002, p.49). Scotland's first large-scale Hydro plant, completed in 1906, was at Kinlochleven and operated by British Aluminium.

[27] From the 2nd Reading Debate of the 'Grampian Electricity Supply Order Confirmation Bill', *Parliamentary Papers*, 1940-1, 10th September 1941, Volume 374, Columns 244-5.

[28] *Ibid.*, column 235.

[29] *Ibid.*, column 250.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] The *Oxford English Dictionary* actually makes clear that the 1950s were indeed the point at which a change in usage for this word appears to have occurred. The original and principal meaning of the word referred to a given thing's 'quality of being pleasant or agreeable' and was also usable in relation to a person's 'niceness' of manner. By the late 1950s the usage had changed to one referring to principally material and practical considerations which is how the term tends to be used today. In other words, the term amenity actually shifts in usage from 'niceness' or 'loveliness' through 'desirability' to 'usefulness' or 'well-provided-for'. Though the *OED* does not mention these debates specifically, it is clear that they formed part of the public discourse which was actively reforming this word's usage.

[32] This play, and others by Gunn, are discussed briefly in Richard Price, 'Choosing a Play: A Critical Survey of Neil M. Gunn's Drama', *Studies in Scottish Literature* 29 (1996): 95-117. The article is [available online](#).

[33] Neil M. Gunn, *Hail, Caledonian!*, in *Scots Magazine*, 29.2 (May 1938): 113-122, p. 115. It is revealed later that Ewan is employed by British Aluminium, the private company who operated Scotland's first, large-scale, Hydro-electric plant (p.118).

[34] Sir John Snell, 'Report of the Water Power Resources Committee to the Board of Trade' in *Parliamentary Reports*, 1921, 37-8.

[35] Gunn, *Hail, Caledonian!*, p. 121.

[36] Rt. Hon. Lord Cooper, *Report of the Committee on Hydro-Electrical Development in Scotland*, December 1942, p.32.

[37] *Ibid.*, p.34.

[38] From the 2nd Reading debate of the Hydro-Electric (Development) Scotland Bill on the 24th February 1943. See *Parliamentary Proceedings*, Volume 387/34, columns 184 and 187-9.

[39] *Ibid.*, column 211.

[40] Ibid., column 212. Gunn's own awareness of Calgacus is evident from the speeches of Tomas the drover in the 1934 novel *Butcher's Broom* (Souvenir Press: London, 1977), p. 106.

[41] Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and The Germania*, trans. By H. Mattingly (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1948), p.81. Most nationalists were fond of using the word 'desert' rather than 'desolation'. Modern translations tend to use the latter.

[42] 2nd Reading debate of the Hydro-Electric (Development) Scotland Bill, column 196.

[43] 3rd Reading debate of the Hydro-Electric (Development) Scotland Bill, 27th May 1942, *Parliamentary Proceedings*, 389/71, columns 1775-80.

[44] 2nd Reading Debate of the Hydro-Electric Development (Scotland) Bill, columns 246-7.

[45] Neil M. Gunn to C. M. Grieve, 3rd December 1937, regarding the unfavourable reception of *Highland River*, in *Neil Gunn: Selected Letters*, ed. by J B Pick, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1987), p. 54.

[46] Johnston, *Memories*, p. 174.

[47] Ibid., p. 177.

[48] *Butcher's Broom*, p. 169.

[49] Neil M. Gunn, *Off in a Boat: A Hebridean Voyage* [1938], (House of Lochar: Colansay, 1998), p. 323.

[50] Neil M. Gunn, *The Serpent* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1943), p. 173.

[51] Ibid., p. 23.

[52] Ibid., p. 173.

[53] Neil M. Gunn, 'Round the Black Isle', *SMT Magazine* 32.1 (July 1943): 20-2, p. 22.

[54] Gunn, 'Belief in Ourselves', p. 161.

[55] Neil M. Gunn, 'Living in Scotland Today', *Scottish Field* 104 (February 1956): 51-3, p. 51.

[56] Ibid., pp. 52-3, 54.

[57] 1st Committee Reading day, 5th May 1943, Hydro Electric Development (Scotland Bill), *Parliamentary Proceedings*, 389/61, columns 220-1.

[58] Neil M. Gunn, 'Giants and Distant Bells', *Glasgow Herald*, 18 February 1950, p. 3.

Occasional Paper: 'How Tartan is Your Text?'

Stuart Kelly

Two contrasting news stories from last year exemplify the extent to which 'Scottish Literature' is still a debatable territory. In January 2008, the National Library of Congress in America responded to pressure from the Scottish Government, the National Library of Scotland, the British Library and the American Modern Language Association and dropped proposals to reclassify all Scottish works as 'English'. Under the system that had been envisaged, Robert Burns, for example, would move from 'Scottish Poetry' to a catalogue and shelving reference of 'English Poetry, Scottish Authors'. Then in March 2009, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland, announced that under their new guidelines students would have to read at least one text from their 'nation', 'to ensure that young people in England are guaranteed access to their own literary heritage, as are students in Wales and Northern Ireland'. This prompted the headline in *The Guardian* 'Scottish literature cut out of English GCSE syllabus'. Within a single year, there were media outcries over Scottish Literature being denied recognition as a separate tradition and over Scottish Literature being denied recognition as part of a wider tradition. In an interview with James Kelman, published in *The Herald* on April 25 2009, Paul Dalgarno wrote

On his return to the table, I mention a personal bugbear. As with writers such as Janice Galloway and Alasdair Gray, Kelman's work can be difficult to find. In Waterstone's, for example, his books are not where they should be: the K section of the fiction shelves. Galloway and Gray are not under G. Instead they are annexed in a separate section under Scottish literature. 'It's part of the old imperial legacy that we're marginalised in our own country', says Kelman. 'Our work isn't classified as literature, even in Scotland – it's classified as Scottish'.

Ironically, Waterstone's had actually integrated the 'Scottish Fiction' section back into 'Fiction' in February 2009. This decision by Waterstone's prompted an angry response from a group of Scottish writers (including Janice Galloway and Alan Warner), who had, in 2005, opposed Waterstone's takeover of rival chain Ottakar's on the basis that it would lessen the prominence given to Scottish books.

If little else, the debate has moved on from T. S. Eliot's deliberately provocative question, posed in *The Athenaeum* in August 1919, 'Was there a Scottish Literature?' A deluge of books have been published in the last five years that assert the existence of Scottish Literature as, if not a separate, distinct and discrete entity, then at the very least an acknowledged field of study. There have been no fewer than five histories of Scottish Literature: Carl MacDougall's *Writing Scotland* (Polygon Birlinn, 2004); *Alba Literaria: A History of Scottish Literature*, edited by Marco Fazzini (Amos Edizioni, 2005); Roderick Watson's two-volume *The Literature of Scotland* (Palgrave, 1984 revised 2007); the *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, edited by Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning and Murray Pittock in three volumes (Edinburgh University Press, 2007) and *Scotland's Books* by Robert Crawford (Penguin, 2008). Critical monographs include Gerard Carruthers' *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009); *Contemporary Scottish Literature: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* by Matt McGuire (Palgrave, 2009); the *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, edited by Berthold Schoene (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), the *Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland*, edited by Bill Bell in four volumes (Edinburgh University Press, 2007-9) and *Why Scottish Literature Matters* by Carla Sassi (The Saltire Society, 2005). The *Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels* published its final volumes in 2009, and the equally voluminous *Stirling / South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg* is approaching completion. *Duanaire na Scaicre*, published by Birlinn in 2007, concluded their impressive five-volume anthology of Gaelic poetry from its earliest times to the present day. In addition, almost all the major writers that were associated with the mid-twentieth century 'Scottish Renaissance' (with the notable and lamentable exception of Sydney Goodsir Smith) are now available in collected, foot-noted, and sensitively edited formats. For the student approaching 'Scottish Literature', texts, a critical framework and a level of debate are now present in a manner very different from a generation ago.

That said, the miasma of ambiguity has not wholly evaporated: it might even be argued that such a breathless flurry of publications actually implies a desperate and persistent need to assert the existence of Scottish literature. What is the collective noun for a diversity? Scottish academia insists on its 'Albattitude' to the extent that deep-reading is foregone in favour of a desperate screaming of 'meherelammetoo'. While other literary cultures discuss the pleasure, the

carnavalesque, the difficulty and triumph, the *olio-podrida* of reading, the Scots stick with a great Yahweh-ish 'I AM'.

Indeed, most of the histories of Scottish literature begin by anxiously questioning their own validity. The problem remains one of definition, and every definition that can be advanced is partial. These include 'books written by people born in Scotland' (which would exclude James Robertson and Burns Singer), 'books written in Scotland' (which would include Orwell's *1984* and, famously, *Harry Potter* but exclude Spark's *Memento Mori* and Byron's *Don Juan*) and books 'about' or 'set' in Scotland (which would include Charles Jennings's *Faintheart* and Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* but exclude A.L. Kennedy's *Everything You Need* and John Buchan's *Sick Heart River*). Some writers – especially the Canadians Alice Munro and Alistair Macleod – have been co-opted as honorary Scots based on ancestry and a nebulous 'sensibility'; an accolade never afforded to Ian McEwan or Michael Crichton. Often the delineation of the Scottish 'field of enquiry' can seem perilously similar to the Indian Dad on BBC's *Goodness Gracious Me*. A soft combination of all feasible definitions, refined by the whim or aesthetic predilections of the critic, seems to hold sway in most accounts. A subtler variation of this – espoused by Gerard Carruthers and Cairns Craig – is the assertion that all national histories have been revealed as artificial rather than natural constructs, so Scotland is no different in being self-reflexive. A similar argument is put forward by Carla Sassi, where the problematic nature of defining the field is seen as the intellectual justification for studying the field. The rest of the world is the same, the argument goes, but we are more blatantly the same. Being self-consciously anomalous makes us potentially typical.

This segues neatly with the rise in post-colonial readings of Scottish literature (Homi Bhabha is cited more frequently than any other theorist in Schoene's *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*). The 'post-colonial turn' in Scottish criticism was ably critiqued by Liam Connell in 'Modes of Marginality: Scottish Literature and the Uses of Postcolonial Theory', and indeed the Scottish claims to postcolonial status had already been questioned in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* in 1989. This leads to what might be called Postcolonialism 2.0, where Scotland's lack of evident colony status, complicity with Imperialism and internal displacements and tensions are thought to make it *even more* pliable to 'post-colonial' analysis. As Stefanie Lehner writes 'paradoxically, it is its examination by and within a British-metropolitan template that has led to an accentuation of Scotland's anomalous historical development and emphasised its affinity with post-colonial cultures'. Secondly, the increase of interest in the work of John Macmurray, the Scottish communitarian moral philosopher whose work was influential of the thinking on Tony Blair, seems relevant. Schoene describes Macmurray's work as 'striking in its anticipation of deconstructionist discourse as well as much

influential postcolonial theory' and '[Scotland's] own indigenous theoretical resource'. Why, exactly, Macmurray's place of birth should be of importance is uncertain, and the suspicion therefore exists that the discovery of a 'native' strain of theoretics can be used to counter accusations of expedient adoption of theoretics developed elsewhere in the world. In his use of Macmurray, Cairns Craig (writes Schoene) 'puts a definitive end to a critical tradition of tautologically measuring all things Scottish by their degree of "Scottishness"'.

That is not to say that the 'how tartan is this text' approach has vanished overnight, and the historical volumes listed above amply demonstrate that the 'rediscovery' of Scottish texts still has some critical purchase. Robert Crawford pays particular attention to writing in Latin, and figures such as John Barclay (1582-1621), whose *Argenis* is singled out for its centrality to the development of prose fiction in Europe and claimed as the 'first Scottish novel'. Curiously, Crawford pays little attention to the allegorical aspects of *Argenis*, dealing, as they do, predominately with London and French affairs. The first volume of the *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* pushes back further into the earliest examples of writing in this part of the world. Enshrining the research and approach which Thomas Owen Clancy pioneered in *The Triumph Tree*, the new history devotes significant attention to literature before 1314, including Norse skalds, early Gaelic, the Welsh *Y Gododdin* and French *Fergus of Galloway*, Latin hagiography and (in Sassi's account but not the *Edinburgh History*) the Vindolanda Epistles from Hadrian's Wall. Even the otherwise conventional *Alba Literaria* opens with Michael Scotus, whose *vagrans* career has appealed to the continentally inflected Kenneth White. Across all these histories, a common foundation myth appears, wrapped in the deconstruction of foundation myths: that of a polyglot, diverse Scotland, a Scotland of shifting territorial or linguistic boundaries. In effect, a proto-post-colonial Scotland.

The inclusions may create an atmosphere of inclusivity, but what of the exclusions? The most glaring omission in the *Edinburgh History* (which is structured as individual essays rather than continuous prose) is the lack of any specific essay on the work of Sir Thomas Urquhart. Given Urquhart's translation of Rabelais, and Rabelais' importance to the theorist most beloved of Scottish critics prior to the postcolonial turn – Mikhail Bakhtin – this omission is inexplicable. In fact, a New Historicist reading of Urquhart that re-establishes his relationship with other prose writers of the day, rather than reading him as a deliberate eccentric, is sorely needed. Crawford's *Scotland's Books* is by far the most diligent and imaginative in filling-in gaps in the traditional canon – and the bravest in including works such as Veronica Forrest-Thomson's *Twelve Academic Questions* and Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* (usually overlooked for more obvious reasons). MacDougall's book, being a TV tie-in, is least embarrassed of its omissions, although one at least – Thomas Carlyle, mentioned merely en passant – seems curiously

prescient when one reads Michael Gardiner's essay in the *Edinburgh Guide to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, with its peculiar reference to 'the blankness in literary culture from the 1830s to the 1890s'.

One writer whose liminal inclusion/exclusion is of particular interest is James Thomson, the Ednam-born author of *The Seasons* who, every history reminds us, went to London and wrote 'Rule Britannia'. Everyone feels obliged to mention Thomson, though usually they do so, as the Oxford lady purportedly said when voting Liberal, while holding their noses. Watson says that Thomson's appeal to the Romantics – defined, unspokenly, as Wordsworth and Coleridge – was important but that 'with this, Thomson passes into the history of literature in England'. That is a deeply perplexing statement, made more so by the observation, repeated in Crawford, that Thomson is important as an influence on Alasdair MacMhaighster Alasdair and Robert Burns. One wonders if *Quentin Durward's* influence on Dumas makes Scott pass into the history of literature in France, albeit briefly. Carruthers gives a more detailed analysis of Thomson, but his reading is again bedevilled by quasi-nationalist misgivings. Carruthers, unsurprisingly, takes lines 880 to 901 of 'Autumn' to represent Thomson's feelings about Scotland and Scottishness, from 'See Caledonia in romantic view –' through to the couplet '(As well unhappy Wallace can attest / Great patriot-hero! ill-requited chief!)'. Carruthers anachronistically claims that English readers would be more accustomed to thinking of Wallace as a 'terrorist' – a term introduced by Burke half a century later. The textual history of the poem makes it even more problematic.

The original version of 'Summer' in 1727 had a paean to British heroes, which was expanded throughout later editions, but began with a balancing rejoinder where Thomson writes 'Rapt I might sing thy Caledonian sons, / A gallant, warlike, unsubmitting race!' who are 'not to their own realms confined / but into foreign countries shooting far, / As over Europe bursts the Boreal Morn'. In 1730, the 'praise of Scotland' section was moved to 'Autumn', so that the British heroes section became uniformly English. Moreover, the lines in parentheses that Carruthers ends his quote with cut across the sense of the poem. Line 899 reads 'Who still through bleeding ages struggled hard' going on in 902 and following

To hold a generous undiminished state,
Too much in vain! Hence, of unequal bounds
Impatient, and by tempting glory borne
O'er every land, for every land their life
Has flowed profuse, their piercing genius planned,
And swelled the pomp of peace their faithful toil.

The rhetoric here has moved from acquiescently British to proactively British: the Union has jump-started Scottish international action. The placing in 'Autumn' is also worth examining. Although, post-Keats, it would be tempting to shunt Thomson into a dwam of melancholy about faded glory, 'Autumn' is in fact the season Thomson associates with reaping the ripe benefits of careful planning and judicious choices. The Britishness of Thomson is a far more layered and nuanced affair: take his lines in 'Spring' on the agricultural landscape of the Cheviots again:

...the massy mound
That runs around the hill – the rampart once
Of iron war, in ancient barbarous times,
When disunited Britain ever bled.

That 'disunited' Britain was only 21 years old when Thomson published 'Spring'. The textual vacillations in Thomson's *Seasons* deserve more attention than the brief mentions given in these histories, and even his later works – such as *The Castle of Indolence* – can be read within specific and expansive frameworks. For example: why was the Spenserian Stanza suddenly so important? To what extent were proto-nationalist histories emerging in terms of the varying neoclassicisms, the resurgence of interest in native forms – from Standard Habbie to the Spenserian Stanza, and my all-time-favourite quote in the period, from Thomas Warton's 1774-81 *History of English Poetry*: 'dragons are a sure sign of orientalism' – to the ways in which aesthetic difference and national difference were becoming codified? Why does Thomson's *Alfred: A Masque* receive minimal critical interrogation (not even with the current swing back towards the work of antiquarians) but Home's *Douglas* does?

I should now play my trump card: I am not an academic, I am the Literary Editor for *Scotland on Sunday*. The reason I feel the need to bring the personal into the supposedly impersonal academic essay is that the book that intrigues me most of all these is the *Edinburgh Guide to Contemporary Scottish Literature*. I opened with a salvo of quotations from the media about Scottish writing, and moved to this weird rash of histories and critical handbooks. I mentioned the 'how tartan is this text' question because it is a day to day problem for me: does Ali Smith deserve a lead more than Joyce Carol Oates? Does a new collection by Robert Crawford weigh more in terms of our readership, our space, our expertise, our time-scale for the piece than a review of Roger McGough or Sharon Olds or Jen Hadfield or Yang Lian? What role does the media play in the debate about the future of Scottish literature? Are we the shock-troops, asked to confront new writing without the benefit of a bibliography, or the lag-behinds, always catching up on academe's citation machine?

So, in the interests of full and frank disclosure I should say that firstly, I know the authors being discussed. Contrary to popular belief most reviewers read a great deal, and given the smallness of Scotland (one of the few countries where playing 'Six Degrees of Separation' stops at two rounds), I have also met, interviewed and become friends with many of the subjects of these essays. It also raises the question about the precise nature of canon-formation: who exactly is determining the future canon?

The *Edinburgh Companion* is divided into four sections: contexts, genres, authors and topics. Quite what the difference is between genres and topics eludes me, since, for example, David Stenhouse and Euan Hague's entertaining and informative essay on American Romance novels with Scottish settings seems to describe a genre, rather than a topic, and Christopher Whyte's sketchy but pugnacious 'Twenty-one Collections for the Twenty-first Century' is categorised as an essay on 'genre' (rather than the topic of contemporary poetry). TV drama is a 'genre' and cinema is 'topic'. The back jacket claims that the volume discusses 'the work of solidly established Scottish authors ... alongside that of relative newcomers who have entered the scene over the past ten years or currently emergent writers who are still in the process of getting noticed as part of a new literary avant-garde'. I find the 'new literary avant-garde' claim very difficult to square with the majority of new Scottish texts being published. Indeed, much contemporary Scottish writing has a faintly epigonic feel to it: some phonetic rendition of speech in the manner of Kelman, some *nostalgie de la boue* from Welsh, some typographical shenanigans (so much easier with Word than with typesetting) à la Gray. There is no room in a volume such as this for work by John Aberdein, Andrew Drummond, Jenny Turner, Jen Hadfield, Elaine di Rollo, J O Morgan, Todd McEwen or Lucy Ellmann – indeed, the 'avant-garde' promoted in this volume seems to be which fits and expands the paradigm established by a previous generation and recognised by academia, rather than one which disrupts or destabilises it.

Such a volume also, almost by definition, will be anachronistic by the time it is published. In Gavin Wallace's essay, 'Voyages of Intent', the decision of 'two metropolitan colossi, Penguin and Hodder Headline, to open branches in Scotland' is given as evidence of the strength of Scottish literary culture. Penguin Scotland nevertheless closed in January of 2008; while Hodder Headline has specialised in the commercial sector (although at the time of writing their literary list has begun to expand). Similarly, Stephen Bernstein's article on 'post-millennial' Gray cannot accommodate Gray's most recent fiction (*Old Men In Love*, 2007) which deals gauchely and explicitly with the Iraq War's effect on traditional socialism, nor can David Borthwick's essay deal with A. L. Kennedy's award-winning *Day*, after which his concluding remarks on her recent oeuvre – 'her insistence on providing such strong metanarrative coordinates can often be intrusive, an overshadowing rather than a foreshadowing of her characters' actions and concerns'

– seem rather over-played. ‘Genre writing’ is given due attention, although the hierarchies of genre persists in academia as much as in the wider literary world. Crime fiction – or tartan noir – comes pre-packaged with contemporary relevance. Iain M. Banks, since he sometimes writes without the ‘M’, makes science-fiction acceptable, but equally imaginative works by Matthew Fitt, Charles Stross and Ken MacLeod are not included (MacLeod in particular has recently started exploring distinctively Scottish science-fiction: Michael Cobley, previously a fantasy writers, has also used the tradition of Scottish emigration as a backdrop to interstellar migration). Fantasy writing is still beyond the pale, but work by Ricardo Pinto, Hal Duncan and Alan Campbell is ripe for analysis. Fantasy, as opposed to science-fiction, seems better able to explore ideas relating to religious belief and taboo. In terms of international and critical success, the work of Alan Grant, Grant Morrison and Mark Millar in comic books dwarfs even the success of tartan noir. Morrison has done a great deal to introduce surrealism, ‘wall-breaking’ and an intriguing approach to canonicity to the DC universe and his own author-owned titles. Millar’s sceptical interrogation of heroism in *Superman: Red Son*, *Wanted*, *Chosen*, *1985* and *Kick-ass* seems to align him with various historical re-creations in contemporary Scottish prose literature.

The authors selected for the third section are: Edwin Morgan and Liz Lochhead; Alasdair Gray; James Kelman; Andrew Greig; Christopher Whyte; Iain (M.) Banks; Janice Galloway; Jackie Kay; Irvine Welsh; Kathleen Jamie; Don Paterson; Alan Warner and A. L. Kennedy – a proto-canon of contemporary Scottish writing. The expedience of academic availability seems to determine the selection, rather than any qualitative or quantitative rationale – indeed, even an avowal of subjective preference would be better than the silence shrouding this. Many of the essays are actually very good indeed – I would single out Robert Morace’s piece on Welsh’s *Porno* – but the underlying question won’t go away. Why not commission specific work on Ali Smith and Andrew O’Hagan, the two contemporary Scottish authors most frequently shortlisted for the Booker Prize? My predecessor as literary editor, Andrew Crumey (who contributes a typically mordant essay on the media and Scottish writing) is also a novelist, whose work has been translated almost as much as Janice Galloway’s and Alan Warner’s. (It may be the case that Crumey’s more ‘European’ cerebral fictions, owing more to Borges and Calvino than Buchan and Kelman, is less tractable to nationalistically inflected criticism). Similarly, I was surprised that there was no separate entry on the work on John Burnside, whose evolving mythos is evident in his short stories, novels, poems and memoir: again, Burnside’s earlier novels (as opposed to *The Devil’s Footprints* and *Glister*) are less obviously ‘Scottish’. As always, Frank Kuppner, one of the most idiosyncratic and interesting Scottish writers, whose work perhaps is closest in spirit if not technique to the London writer Iain Sinclair, is barely mentioned.

How does the Scottish canon evolve? The 'Poets' Pub' painting by Alexander Moffat is a self-evident fiction of a literary coterie. There are numerous, now historical, examples of how groups coalesce. When Alexander Trocchi was sending out his first *Sigma* pamphlet, the Scottish authors he singled out were Morgan, Hamilton Finlay, Tom McGrath, Hugh MacDiarmid and Kenneth White: a prototype for a Scottish 'avant-garde' history. Philip Hobsbaum's reading group in Glasgow is frequently described as a catalyst for the 'Glasgow Renaissance', and its membership is taken to have included Gray, Kelman, Tom Leonard, Aonghas Macneacail, Liz Lochhead, and Bernard MacLavery; although more recent interviews have cast doubt on the regularity of the meetings and the self-consciousness of the writers as a coherent 'group' or 'movement'. More archive research on the work of two editors – Peter Kravitz at Polygon, who first published A. L. Kennedy, Kelman, Galloway and Ian Rankin; and Robin Robertson at Jonathan Cape (himself a fine poet not mentioned in this volume) who edits or edited Kennedy, Galloway, Warner and Welsh – might go a long way towards understanding how the so-called 'Scottish Renaissance' came into being. In poetry, the short-lived but influential group 'the Informationists', who published in *Verse*, *Gairfish*, and *Southfields*, and who included Robert Crawford, W. N. Herbert, Richard Price, David Kinloch and others, deserve separate attention, as does the role of Donny O'Rourke's anthology *Dream State*, especially in the difference between the first and second editions.

Literary reviews do give prominence to certain writers – Andrew Crumey discusses in his essay how my colleague Kenny Farquharson's profile of Welsh did a great deal to establish to idea of a 'new wave' of rebellious writers. I was vaguely amused to read in Kirsten Innes' otherwise interesting article about the use of the c-word in contemporary Scottish writing, that one of the authors she discusses – Alan Bissett – had been called 'the new Irvine Welsh'. Flipping to the bibliography, it transpires that this epithet was coined in *The Sun*, a newspaper not known for its literary enthusiasms. Newspaper reviews can be extracted in a misleading manner – the opening sentence will often situate the author in a context, before the meat of the review, and it is not unheard of for publishers to take the 'scene setting' as an endorsement.

Like the histories mentioned above, *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* subscribes to a narrative of history, with the devolution votes in 1979 and 1997 accorded a great deal of significance. Liam McIlvanney wrote in *On Modern British Fiction* that 'By the time the Parliament arrived [in 1999], a revival in fiction had long been underway... Without waiting for the politicians, Scottish novelists had written themselves out of despair'. The critic Cairns Craig went one step further: 'The 1980s proved to be one of the most productive and creative decades in Scotland this century – as though the energy that had failed to be harnessed by the politicians flowed into other channels. In literature, in thought, creative and scholarly work

went hand in hand to redraw the map of Scotland's past and realign the perspectives of the future'. Douglas Gifford makes the connection even more explicitly:

It is tempting to see this change in confidence as somehow related to the 1979 Devolution referendum and the growing assertions of Scottish identity and its varieties that emerged almost in defiance of that quasi-democratic debacle. With this new confidence, Scottish fiction approached the new millennium as a standard bearer for Scottish culture, arguably even supplying the most successful explorations of changing Scottish identities, in a rich variety of voices and genres. The new complexities... relate dynamically to the changes taking place in Scottish society at large, not only reacting to them, but influencing the framework of thought in which they took place.

Lanark becomes the foundation myth of this Renaissance, leading one to wonder what would have happened if it had been published by Quartet in 1976.

The idea that political despair after the 1979 Devolution referendum was alchemically transformed into cultural success is problematic. As Allan Massie perceptively wrote in *The Spectator*, 'talk of a cultural renaissance suggests there was an earlier death in the family. It's hard to see when that was supposed to be'. Any overview of Scottish writing before 1979 – including, for example, Muriel Spark, Archie Hind, Naomi Mitchison and Jessie Kesson, as well as the poets Edwin Morgan, Norman McCaig, Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley Maclean – would suggest it was in rude health before Mrs Thatcher came to power. Tom Leonard was rather more cutting on the idea of a Renaissance, when he asked where our Sistine Chapel was. Likewise, if we accept the idea of the frustrated devolution picture, what happens after 1997, when Scotland did vote for a devolved parliament with tax-varying powers? At the time, there was a mild flurry of concern; akin to the idea that somehow political satire would become superfluous with the change in government. Would Scottish culture lose its 'mobilising grievance'? Some critics thought that devolution would allow for a liberating normality to enter Scottish writing – writers would be able to explore something other than the nature of Scottish identity. In the words of the poet, critic and novelist, Christopher Whyte, 'in the absence of an elected political authority, the task of the representing the nation has been repeatedly devolved to its writers... one can hope that the setting up of a Scottish parliament will at last allow Scottish literature to be literature first and foremost, rather than the expression of a nationalist movement'. Others, such as the *Scotsman* literary editor and director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, Catherine Lockerbie, were more cautious: 'now devolution has been achieved, people don't have to prove they are Scottish writers anymore... I think we've moved on from the days of the stereotypical writer.'

Young writers don't have to write those quasi-political novels. I think you'll find something more interesting and individual from them, rather than following the old path. The chip on the shoulder has been turned into a twiglet if you like and the Scottish cultural cringe has certainly diminished'. A level of debate and aesthetic confidence no doubt contributed, in an intangible degree, to the success of the 1997 vote: at the same time, the closure of Ravenscraig, the introduction of the poll-tax a year early in Scotland and the collapse of the Conservative vote in Scotland maybe helped as well.

Against this background, it is tempting to think that Schoene's prediction that Scottishness would no longer be the measure of Scottishness would be explicit in the criticism in *The Edinburgh Companion*. In fact, 'to ensure a sense of *telos* within the collection, all contributors were asked... to contextualise their specific readings within an analysis of contemporary Scottish literature's affinity with various pro-, anti- and post-nationalist discourses'. This 'sense of *telos*' is actually an assimilatory process: even when Scottish writers do not engage with nationalist debate, their refusal is taken to be part of that debate. Newspaper reviews may be criticised on a number of grounds, but at least their primary function is to debate the aesthetic merits of the work in question rather than fit it into a tessellation of opinion on nationalism. This 'sense of *telos*' is perilously close to becoming circular reasoning, and the Greek meaning of *telos* – the end, as well as the direction – makes the anthology covertly similar to the conservative historiography of a figure like Fukayama. It tacitly reinforces the picture of literary history as inflected by debates over statehood.

The Index to the volume reinforces this sense of the *Kleinstadtsch* here: the only non-Scottish authors listed (excluding translated authors) are Bataille, Baudelaire, Raymond Chandler, W. E. B. DuBois, T. S. Eliot, Bret Easton Ellis, Seamus Heaney, Alan Hollinghurst, Kafka, Jean Rhys, Rushdie, Ben Okri, Poe, Ezra Pound and J. D. Salinger. Yet the authors discussed in the volume have frequently discussed a far greater and more diverse range of non-Scottish authors: Warner has written on Sadegh Hedayat; Duncan McLean on Knut Hamsun; Ali Smith on Christine Brooke-Rose; Kelman on Ngugi wa'Thiongo and Chinua Achebe; Don Paterson has discussed E. M. Cioran and Ian Rankin gave a rousing appreciation of Thomas Pynchon. Comparative criticism might well be the way for Scottish literature to engage fully with its status as literature, rather than its carapace of Scottishness.

There are still many areas where Scottish Literary Studies lags behind other, more well-established fields of academic enquiry. Particularly in the areas of biography and bibliography much essential work remains to be done – for example, a modern biography of Christopher Grieve is long overdue; a critical edition of the entire works of Galt is lacking; and monographs

revising certain long-held critical shibboleths (the 'lack' of a coherent tradition in the seventeenth century or the nature of the 'Kailyard' and its persistence into popular mid-twentieth century writing such as that of O. Douglas and Annie S. Swann) should be thoroughly examined. 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 is not only crass, it is symptomatic of an academic culture overly concerned with patrolling and defending the borders of its own institutional existence.

In a wider context, too close a relationship between academia and arts bureaucracy can lead to a deadening effect on cultural production: academics advise the Arts Council on which authors ought to receive funding; they likewise sit on judging panels of prominent prizes and in the past have reviewed new writing for periodicals. It is not, I think, to disparage their sincere efforts to suggest a very real danger exists that academia will exert a distorting influence on canon-formation when it comes to contemporary work. It will over-emphasise that which conforms to a particular theory, or favoured mode of discourse: a problem even further exacerbated when Literary Studies and Creative Writing become departmental bedfellows.

As for any notion of a 'new literary avant-garde', I remain deeply sceptical: a scepticism encouraged whenever I wonder what older avant-garde writers would have made of premature academic lionisation. Again, the porous nature of the boundaries between writer, creative writing tutor, arts bureaucrat and academic means that a system becomes merely self-perpetuating. That nebulous idea of the 'literary establishment' is often real enough when it comes to log-rolling and puff-providing. When I occasionally lecture to Creative Writing Students I offer them a sentence and ask them to find the mistake: a young author in a bar says to his friend 'I've asked my agent to speak to my editor to tell my publicist to have a word with my reviewer'. Reviewing is still independent from the business model of publishing. Perhaps academia should take a leaf from its book.