

## 'You can't get there from here':

### Devolution and Scottish literary history

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Because devolution in Britain is an essentially ambiguous and contested process, it poses a challenge to anyone setting out to write critical, that is disinterested, history. In a review of Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature*, James Chandler describes 'devolution' as 'the term by which Scottish separatists name what they want to see happen to the legal-political entity "Great Britain": on this account devolution is the object of nationalist aspirations, the political expression of Scottish cultural autonomy.<sup>[1]</sup> However technically, as Vernon Bogdanor points out, devolution 'provides for a parliament which is constitutionally *subordinate* to Westminster'; leaving intact the legitimacy of the British state, its value for a nationalist is that of a preliminary step on the way to a quite different political landscape.<sup>[2]</sup> Like the rhetoric of 'new politics' in Scotland, the very term 'devolution' can be seen as belonging historically to those parties which participated in the Constitutional Convention.<sup>[3]</sup> What is true of the word is also true of the series of events to which it is appended: its significance and meaning for the historian will depend on the narrative frame within which it is placed. Yet discussion of these complexities and ambiguities has been notable mostly for its absence in the study of contemporary literature, where something akin to a re-nationalization of literary history seems to be taking place, the most obvious symptom of which is the publication of the *Oxford English Literary History* under the editorship of Jonathan Bate, with the possibility of matching multi-volume Scottish, Irish and Welsh literary histories having been mooted by Oxford University Press.

The re-emergence of national literary history is itself worthy of comment. David Perkins has argued that the heyday of the national literary history ran from roughly 1840 to 1940 and 'may be thought an aberration in the 2,400 years of western criticism'.<sup>[4]</sup> Certainly, literary theory in the

middle of the twentieth century was dominated by the rejection of what René Wellek and Austin Warren, in their classic study *Theory of Literature*, distinguish as 'extrinsic' literary histories. An intrinsic approach to literature focuses on the work of art as an autonomous artefact; an extrinsic approach seeks to explain particular works, or the development of series of works, in relation to social, political or historical events. In their final chapters, Wellek and Warren admit the possibility of something like an intrinsic literary history, in which some aspect of the internal relations of the system of literature is studied as it evolves or develops over time; two decades later, R.S. Crane's discussion in his *Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History* focuses mostly on this notion of literary history, and only in passing on the extrinsic approach, or what he calls 'dialectical' literary history.<sup>[5]</sup> These distinctions remain useful, even if they cannot be held to consistently, not least if we make the historicist assumption that what counts as 'literature' changes over time, and that therefore the criteria by which we distinguish 'intrinsic' from 'extrinsic' factors will themselves be variable. The revival of historicism in literary studies has tended to make the latter assumption, and consequently to dissolve literary history into something more like anthropology or cultural studies, in which the nation becomes an object of analysis rather than a causal or explanatory principle and the literary artwork becomes an index to a particular configuration of social forces.

Although 'disreputable', in the words of one respectable handbook of literary terms, national literary history has had a surprising persistence, as Linda Hutcheon observes in her essay 'Rethinking the National Model'.<sup>[6]</sup> Recent revisionist literary histories which have challenged older forms of criticism in the name of the politics of identity have relied on basic principles of the romantic model of national literary history: the existence of distinct literary traditions; the mutual interrelation of those traditions with social or cultural groups; and the parallel development of both tradition and community. Hutcheon sees this as a pragmatic political decision: 'This kind of narrative worked once for nations, and it just might work again: such is the manifest utopian power of evolutionary narratives of progress. This choice is clearly being made despite the risk of both complicity [sic] and the kind of exclusivist thinking that nationalisms have made us so aware of today'.<sup>[7]</sup> Hutcheon's analysis suggests that the alternative posed by Nietzsche in his well-known essay on 'The Utility and Liability of History for Life' still holds: to the extent that critical historical thinking threatens to dissolve the narrative fiction of an identity persisting through time, it is a threat to the political life of the community.<sup>[8]</sup> Never has Nietzsche's analysis seemed more timely: once we accept that a nation is an 'imagined community' in Benedict Anderson's well-known formulation, it seems as if the 'truth' or otherwise of a national literature becomes irrelevant, and the only question that remains is whether or not we can persuade someone else of its existence.

'Devolution' in Britain has been largely, and prematurely, interpreted in national terms by writers of literary history. In this essay I will examine the historiography of contemporary Scottish

literature in order to foreground the political and critical principles which underlie this interpretation. The advantage of beginning from discussions of contemporary writing is that two characteristics of literary history which tend to be occluded over time remain visible: the process of selection which cuts the full range of a society's literary production down to manageable proportions; and the dependence of that sorting on a miscellaneous accretion of judgements made on an unstable mixture of commercial, social and aesthetic grounds. The following analysis of the national style in writing about contemporary Scottish literature may also offer a preliminary reflection on the conditions of possibility of literary history as such.

## I

That there is a link between devolution and the 'revival' of contemporary Scottish literature has become a critical commonplace on both sides of the border with England. 'Bullish' is probably the most suggestive word by which recent Scottish literary historiography might be characterised. Robert Crawford's description in *Scotland's Books: The Penguin History of Scottish Literature* of 'the strength and diversity of contemporary Scottish literature' as 'astonishing' is exemplary.<sup>[9]</sup> Although acknowledging that 'the relationship between imaginative writing and society is frequently oblique' (659) and alive to those temptations which mean that 'Scots too readily hymn their literature as straightforwardly "democratic"' (462, cf. 710-11), Crawford forges a direct path between art and politics. In particular, he links the international recognition by which he judges the success of Scottish writing to the decentralization of legislative control over a limited range of policy areas by Westminster to an elected body at Holyrood: 'there are connections between the recovery of a Parliament in Edinburgh and the ambitious course of modern Scottish literature [...] Though the word is a slippery one, a "democratic" urge within Scottish writing has grown in strength, going beyond the boundaries of conventional politics, and beyond Scotland itself' (660). Indeed, 'literature has operated in advance of political structures' (661). It's an uplifting story. The vitality of contemporary Scottish writing, stemming from its concern 'to give voice to those apparently sidelined', has helped Scotland overcome alienation and disenfranchisement, and foster a positive 'reassertion of national identity' whose outcome is a 'people's Parliament' (662) which was 'long imagined throughout the twentieth century' (661).

Crawford is not alone in making this claim. In his contribution to the *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, Douglas Gifford divides the history of post-war Scottish fiction into a pessimistic and a 'more positive' epoch, and comments: 'it is tempting to see this change in confidence as somehow related to the 1979 Devolution referendum and the growing assertion of Scottish identity and its varieties that emerged almost in defiance of that quasi-democratic debacle'.<sup>[10]</sup> Berthold Schoene suggests in the *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* that

'the failure of the first referendum on national self-rule resulted in an "unprecedented explosion of creativity [...] often seen as a direct response to the disastrous 'double whammy' that had been inflicted upon the Scottish people in 1979"'.<sup>[11]</sup> Nor is this interpretation confined to works which focus on Scottish literature. In his more broadly-conceived *Consuming Fiction: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* Richard Todd notes 'the compelling connection between the remarkable efflorescence of indigenous cultural activity that began to take place in 1980s Scotland and a crisis arising out of an almost desperate response to external political events'.<sup>[12]</sup> The only essay to address Scottish authors directly in a collection *On Modern British Fiction* sees the Scottish novel as 'a kind of substitute or virtual polity', hinting like Crawford that aesthetic achievement might be considered the forerunner of political autonomy, making *Lanark* a more important landmark than the establishment of a Scottish parliament: 'The "post-British" Scotland to which the Edinburgh Parliament was a laggard response had long been taking shape in the pages of Scottish novels'.<sup>[13]</sup>

These comments should be enough to convey a sense of the general structure within which recent literary history has been written. The self-affirmation of the Scottish people is manifest in both a cultural and political revival. Critical recognition and commercial success for a number of authors, either self-identified or marketed as Scottish, is linked to the political process of devolution as the manifestation of more profound upheavals at the level of national self-consciousness.

The wide currency of this argument is striking, not least for its curious rhetorical structure. Although the statement of the link between literary and political autonomy operates as the enabling condition of the narrative of national literary self-affirmation there is a distinctly hesitant tone about a number of these accounts. For example, when Gifford describes this interpretation as 'tempting', he appears to distance himself from it, but proposes no means of testing its veracity, and offers no alternative hypothesis. Equally, Schoene carefully avoids making a direct connection between politics and aesthetics; enough for his purposes that this claim has already been made, and that the two have been 'often seen' as linked. As if to highlight the point, 'often seen' is itself a citation, taken from Duncan Petrie's *Contemporary Scottish Fictions*. Petrie in his turn bases his assertion that Scotland since the 80s has 'witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of cultural activity and expression' which might be linked to devolution on claims to that end already made by Cairns Craig, Christopher Harvie and Tom Devine.<sup>[14]</sup> The earliest version of this formula I have found comes in Craig's foreword to the Determinations series he edited for Polygon: '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'.<sup>[15]</sup> The first three books of the Determinations series were published in 1989, making the foreword evidence of the cultural phenomenon on which it claims to reflect. Not so

much an argument as an immense rumour, the metaphorical sublimation of political energy into literary production belongs to the realm of the cultural manifesto rather than that of critical history.

This argument is circular partly because it is the circulation of the claim itself that supplies the evidence of the cultural revival to which it purports to attest. As Crawford argues, the 'reassertion of national identity was fuelled not just by political resentment but also by positive developments in intellectual life'. Not only have 'substantial cultural histories [...] restated the fact that Scotland was a nation with still vibrant artistic traditions', but literary history was particularly central to 'this nation gathering-effect' (662). Reflecting on what distinguished the new cultural histories from earlier twentieth-century perceptions of failures and gaps in Scottish literary history, Cairns Craig suggests 'the "failed" tradition of Scottish culture as it appears in the criticism of [the 1920s and 1930s] was actually the failure of the critics to engage with Scottish culture in sufficient breadth to have any adequate notion of its completeness or richness'<sup>[16]</sup> while Gerard Carruthers sees 'a much greater inclusiveness of the various historical and cultural component parts of "Scottishness"' as crucial to what he calls the 'Renaissance' of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>[17]</sup> The story of the revival is also that of a reintegration, taken as the necessary ground for a cultural movement that can be both unified and diverse, whose identity is distinctive but whose inclusiveness is boundless.

Because the production of successful literary works, the renewal of the possibility of Scottish cultural history, and devolution as a political process are all testimony to the reassertion of national identity, it makes little difference whether the starting point of the story is the 1979 referendum, the publication of *Lanark* by Canongate in 1981, or Francis Hart's *The Scottish Novel: A Critical Survey*, the first account of Scottish fiction as a continuous tradition possessing characteristics distinct from those of the English novel, published by John Murray in London in 1978. Once we accept that a nation is not so much a thing we can touch, as a story in which we believe, the historiography of Scottish literature itself becomes an act of determination, part of the continual re-imagination of the nation's forms of life. Or so the story goes: our acquiescence in the assumption that our identity is primarily national is taken for granted. Yet this is precisely what a critical history might test or dispute. The writing of historiography in the national style does not describe the reaffirmation of national identity: it hopes to enact it.

What Wellek and Warren call extrinsic literary history is primarily a narrative form, which consists in manipulating a parallel between two series of events, assumed to be of incommensurate orders. On one side literary production, on the other history, specified in terms of social or political change. In the case of national literary history, these two series are taken to be conjoined via alterations in a third intermediate 'cultural' or 'spiritual' entity, postulated as the ground of both, but of whose existence both series of events are taken to be the only evidence. National identity

here is not so much the product of historiographical analysis as the organising principle of its narrative construction. The link between devolution and literary revival is best understood as a *topos*, a signal between the historian and the reader as to the choice of narrative structure.<sup>[18]</sup>

Foregrounding the narrative aspects of historiography need not lead us into relativist temptation. Introducing her *Curriculum Vitae*, Muriel Spark insists that she will 'write nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or by eyewitnesses'.<sup>[19]</sup> As in her fiction, so in her autobiography Spark is concerned with that trait of Miss Jean Brodie's which intrigues and troubles her most perceptive pupil in equal measure: 'Sandy was fascinated by this method of making patterns with facts, and was torn between her admiration for the technique and the pressing need to prove Miss Brodie guilty of misconduct'.<sup>[20]</sup> Spark refuses the confessional mode which would make autobiography the revelation of those truths of the heart which only the author can tell. In doing so she emphasises that the responsibilities of the story-teller stem not from the difficulty of distinguishing truth from fiction but from the necessity of doing so. If both history and the novel depend on narrative forms, those procedures by which historians agree on the 'facts' are a crucial convention. In other words, the narrative form of history does not turn all history into mythmaking, but demands from us a critical historical practice.<sup>[21]</sup>

Such a critical history might begin by acknowledging that the choice of the rhetorical framework and narrative patterns to be deployed by the literary historian are not simply an arrangement of material, but supply principles of selection. Wellek and Warren argue that 'there are simply no data in literary history which are completely neutral "facts". Value judgements are implied in the very choice of materials: in the simple preliminary distinction between books and literature, in the mere allocation of space to this or that author.' <sup>[22]</sup> In the case of Scottish literary history, the mechanisms are revealing.

The principal difficulty is that the identification of a text as 'Scottish', minimal condition for inclusion in a study of Scottish literary history, will always tend to acquire a substantive content. If a wholly impartial account were possible, the grounds for selection of works for analysis ought to be both prior to and distinct from whatever recurrent features or resemblances we subsequently take to be characteristic of Scottish writing. But there is a structural tendency for the principle or principles, in accordance with which the series of works to be considered in the history are selected, to come to stand over and above the series as itself the object of analysis. Put bluntly, the attempt to write an inductive survey of texts chosen on 'national' grounds — however flexibly and subtly we understand that criterion — will always become an analysis of texts in terms of the extent to which they display 'Scottish' traits. Framed in national terms, the study of literature in Scotland will always tend to become the analysis of Scottish literature, and ultimately, of what is 'Scottish' about that literature.

There are two key mechanisms for this slippage. However cautious and scrupulous the investigator, there will always be a temptation to devote more time and space to those authors who best exemplify the national principles, since they provide the measure for the rest of the material under consideration. Moreover, the priority of the national principle as an organising principle will tend to restrict the possibility of a dispassionate consideration of thematic and formal elements of the text, leading either to a privilege of the representational dimension over other stylistic components (all Scotland's books become books about Scotland), or focusing primarily on the most 'typical' components.<sup>[23]</sup> This is of course also true of other forms of literary history, and it would be wrong to single out Scottish, or nationalist, literary historians as particularly victims of this circle. To focus on a period, a genre or a style will entail the same difficulty.

Literary historians have long been aware of these dangers: in fact most deploy some kind of mechanism to avoid them. For example, Robert Crawford acknowledges that there is a danger of seeing Scottish literature of the 1980s and 1990s as an 'anti-kailyard'. Ronald Frame, taken as an example of 'middle-class Scottish fiction writers writing in English' (690), 'matters all the more' because he is 'not a writer who fits the "gritty working-class" label lazily applied to contemporary Scottish fiction' (691). But the historical mainspring of Crawford's account depends on the artistic success of Scottish writers, and because that success seems to him to stem in large part from a social commitment which blurs at points into a preference for the *volkisch* over the refined, his account naturally prioritises those authors who most explicitly exemplify these principles. Work on contemporary Scottish literature has been admirable in its efforts to include women writers, to compensate for stereotypes of Scottish masculinity, and risks over-exaggerating the significance of writing by ethnic minority authors in its concern to portray Scotland as a tolerant and diverse society. (This may well be a risk worth taking, of course). Crawford's text makes great play of its inclusiveness, and specifically warns the reader against 'commentators [who] treat imaginative writing as if it were straightforward campaigning on behalf of a particular group identity' (705), defending the imaginative independence of black, gay or lesbian Scottish writers often treated as merely exemplary of ethnic or sexual identities, and arguing that it 'would be wrong to ghettoize [works of contemporary Scottish literature], assuming that they have an import only for one sex or gender' (700). But when identity is the principle which organises and motivates the story, it will tend to become its subject. Hailing the alien within has become the boast of Scotland's democratic aesthetic; but for all that 'hyphenated' identity has become the fashion, the Anglo-Scots writer remains on the margins of any history of Scottish literature. So, with prominent exceptions, do the literary exiles. <sup>[24]</sup>

It is revealing to compare Crawford's strategy to that of Richard Bradford, whose recent *The Novel Today* is explicitly concerned with British fiction, but contains a detailed discussion of the problems facing any attempt to define the Scottish novel. Like Crawford, Bradford is sensitive to

the danger that deriving 'Scottish' identity from a perceived marginality in relation to mainstream British culture may in its turn risk excluding not only those Scottish writers whose identity is further distinguished by virtue of racial difference or sexual orientation, but those whose relationship to 'British' literary culture may be less oppositional. The result is an apparent awkwardness in the construction of his *The Novel Today* which neatly reflects the structural dilemma of Scottish literary history. Under the section heading 'Nation, Race and Place' is a chapter entitled 'Scotland' which treats Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Alan Warner and Michel Faber, but Bradford balks at including A.L. Kennedy: 'it could be argued that by placing Kennedy's fiction within a particular, albeit recent, tradition of writing where nationality is as much the animus as the framework of the text, our appreciation of her value as a novelist per se is skewed by preconceptions before we read it'.<sup>[25]</sup> Bradford sees Kennedy, alongside Ali Smith and Candia McWilliam, as novelists whose nationality is largely incidental to their work. Elsewhere William Boyd and Muriel Spark are treated as British writers, while Ian Rankin and Christopher Brookmyre are discussed in the context of genres of popular fiction.

Bradford's approach is certainly more sympathetic towards the views of Scottish writers themselves, who have tended to be sceptical about their identification by critics with a specifically national tradition, about the vogue for Scottish writers amongst London publishers in the late 1980s and 1990s, and even about directly nationalist politics. In an extensive interview published in *Edinburgh Review*, A.L. Kennedy tells Cristie Leigh March that 'Scottish traditions of writing' are 'an irrelevance with most Scottish writers'; talks about her reading of Chekhov, Ibsen, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Eliot, magic realism, and Irish authors before concluding that 'writing is writing'; jokes that 'London publishers are saying, "We must have Scots"' but 'don't really care who you are or what you write'; and comments that she 'can't think of a Scottish writer my age or roundabout that's that aligned', being more likely to consider themselves opposed to politics as such.<sup>[26]</sup> In the same journal issue Janice Galloway also refers to the "'Scottish" sales tag — [...] this mild feeding-frenzy that happened with Scottish writing' and her estrangement from the 'adolescent blokey' image of the stereotypical Scots author.<sup>[27]</sup> Christopher Whyte has also written about this problem at length, from the perspective of both writer and critic. In 'Don't Imagine Ethiopia' he describes his own hesitations about national tradition, while his *Modern Scottish Poetry* is the first work of Scottish literary history which takes seriously the autonomy of the text in relation to the national paradigm.<sup>[28]</sup> As Andrew Crumey, himself an outstanding novelist almost entirely ignored by Scottish academic criticism and relegated to a one-line mention in Robert Crawford's history, points out, the criteria by which an author is recognised as contributing to 'Scottish' literature depend largely on happenstance and the shifting agendas of publishers, journalists, cultural institutions and prize committees.<sup>[29]</sup>

The decision to situate 'Scottish' writing as a possibility made available within a larger and more increasingly 'British' cultural field allows us to acknowledge two key issues for which the narrower view will find it difficult to account. The first is the extent to which genre and style is as much a function of the British or international literary marketplace as it is the expression of national traditions. The second is the way that 'Scottish' has itself come to function as a marker of 'literariness' in the contemporary circulation of cultural value. Where previously aesthetic value had been treated as dependent on a relation to literary 'modernity' seen as alien to 'Scottishness', the critical identification of Scottish literature as oppositional in the 1980s allowed for a dialectical switch.<sup>[30]</sup> In his survey of the contemporary British novel, Steven Earnshaw draws attention to that 'curiosity to read about "new" areas of experience, which has always been a feature of the novel' which 'will also induce the documentation of whatever is 'new' in society, particularly "sub-cultural" experience: for example Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993) and the subsequent rash of novels based on drug- and rave-culture'.<sup>[31]</sup> But literary fashions pass; the breath of Scottish air which once seemed to freshen on the cheeks of publishers and reviewers can quickly become a puff of stale rhetoric; and the valorisation of contemporary Scottish writing as gritty urban realism can be neatly inverted into the image of an anti-kailyard.

Bradford is correct to propose a distinction between questions of identity and questions of style, and in doing so he points to a more concrete base for literary history. Crawford and others have followed publishers and Scottish cultural institutions in treating 'Scottishness' as a flexible category which ought not to be linked too closely to blood and belonging: opportunism going hand-in-hand with multiculturalism. Seeing 'Scottish' characteristics of a text as a stylistic question can also help us avoid over-reliance on those mechanisms of identification. Although literary history need not specify rigorous criteria by which a text should be considered Scottish or not, it would be wrong for the historian not to take some sort of distance from the complex sorting mechanisms by which their object of study has been and is still being constituted as the product of embedded histories of critical, commercial and artistic decisions. Recent Scottish literary history has rarely been supplemented with detailed social history or an analysis of the literary marketplace, perhaps because neither popular taste or the publishing world can be easily differentiated from broader 'British' cultural and commercial conditions. But when the function of 'Scottishness' has become so central to the marketing of books we need to be wary not only of attributing too much significance to its impact on aesthetic decisions by authors, but also of using it uncritically as the explanatory or structuring principle in the construction of literary history.

The writer of any literary history faces a crucial preliminary decision as to the scope of their project. Whether they are pursuing an intrinsic history, in which case the basis for selection of texts will be a formal literary characteristic, or an extrinsic history, when the decision will depend upon an extra-literary category such as period, territory or identity, they will also face decisions

concerning difficult cases, those texts whose inclusion or exclusion will confirm the original and constitutive decision. Finally they will face the perpetual dilemma of the literary historian: how to do justice to the autonomy of an aesthetic work when the organising principle of your own project is heteronomous in relation to the work of art. In the study of contemporary literature, the identification of a text as 'Scottish' leads inexorably to a series of characteristic tensions in discussion of it, manifest either in the omissions and silences of the less self-aware (or more bluntly political) critic, and in the reservations and apologies of the more cautious and self-conscious.

What's really extrinsic about extrinsic literary history is that the legitimacy of these inevitable exclusions rests on a decision which cannot be justified within the terms of narrative literary history itself. To set the discussion of literature in a national context is both to assume and imply the priority of national tradition over other contextual forces shaping the work of art. This in turn both presumes and tends to reinforce the authority of national community as an organisational principle in political life.

Liam Mcllvaney describes Scottish novelists as 'unacknowledged legislators': however a close look at the rhetorical structures of the literary historian suggests that on the contrary, it is the critic whose interpretative framing 'invents' the nation, and that this process will be indifferent to the particular political indications of the text, or of the author. Recognising that the strength of much recent Scottish writing has come from its concern to interrogate the implicit cultural politics of its own narrative form, Mcllvaney comments that 'It would be wrong to reduce the novelists to the cheerleaders of a resurgent nationalism'.<sup>[32]</sup> Not least, one might add, because a suspicion of the politics of narrative will inevitably lead to a suspicion of nationalism as the pre-eminent narrative politics. But their suspicion itself becomes typically 'Scottish'. So the critical circle closes around its object of analysis. Cairns Craig seems more willing to admit the dependence of national literary histories not on authors, but on critics: he has argued that 'since every nation is an "invented nation," every artist is, potentially, the inventor of the nation — and every critic the true interpreter of our only history, that of the creation and recreation of our imaginary communities'.<sup>[33]</sup>

## II

The 'national style' in literary historiography offers neither a social history of popular taste nor a comprehensive account of cultural production; consequently it cares little, and can tell us less, about what most Scots actually read or write. Smuggling in political principles masquerading as aesthetic categories, the national style remains remarkably close to its romantic roots: tending to

collapse aesthetics into the social by identifying the literary vanguard with the spirit of the nation or by reading the state of national confidence from the confidence of its artists and intellectuals. The example of devolutionary literary history suggests that we have not come as far as we might think from Herder, long seen as the founding father of national literary history:

Just as entire nations have one language in common, so they also share favoured paths of the imagination, certain turns and objects of thought, in short, one *genius* that expresses itself, irrespective of any particular difference, in the best-loved works of each nation's spirit and heart. To eavesdrop in this pleasant maze, to tie up that Proteus — whom we commonly call *national character* and who surely expresses himself no less in the writings than in the customs and actions of a nation — and to make him talk: that is a fine and high philosophy. In works of poetry, that is, of the imaginative faculty and of the sensations, such a philosophy is most safely practiced, since it is in these that the *entire soul* of the nation shows itself most freely.<sup>[34]</sup>

These basic principles underlie the works we have been examining. A nation is a spiritual and explanatory principle, to be deduced in circular fashion from those institutions and the imaginative writing that best exemplify it. As in the contemporaneous work of Madame de Stael, 'extrinsic' literary history consists in drawing parallels between the characteristics of groups of literary works and the characteristics of the society which has produced them. This society is conceived as both internally homogeneous and as differentiated from its neighbours with regard to institutions (social, religious, political) and language. The perception by twentieth-century critics of a 'failure' of Scottish literary tradition stemmed for the most part from Scotland's insufficiency in relation to these criteria. But developments in literary theory have allowed critics to rewrite this insufficiency as an exemplary critique of what they describe as the idealism or essentialism of the romantic model. The recent renewal of confidence in the possibility of asserting a continuous narrative history of Scottish literature derives from wider changes within the discipline of literary studies, as much as it does from extrinsic social or political conditions.

'Theory' is a notoriously imprecise term, whose abstract use is largely confined to literary studies. It is best seen as that intermediary intellectual formation which serves to link the emerging discipline of aesthetics and developing discourse of history in the eighteenth century: to bridge the gap between formal and historical approaches to the work of art. This historical and social orientation is what distinguishes 'theory' in its general and expanded sense from developments in rhetoric and poetics. In the case of Scottish literary history, theory has largely served two functions.

The first has been to legitimate Scottish literature as an object of study. Particularly in the period between 1979 and 1997, 'theory' has been deployed to challenge the perception, characteristic of writers and intellectuals of the early part of the twentieth century, that because Scotland was no longer at the forefront of industrial modernity, Scottish writers could not be exemplary producers of the most modern literature. In particular the idea of the 'postmodern' allowed literary historians to disaggregate aesthetic questions from a philosophy of history which only moved in one direction, as it had for Eliot when he asked 'was there a Scottish literature?'.<sup>[35]</sup> As sociology and cultural history became less certain that nations and states, cultural and political systems need be aligned, to paraphrase David McCrone, Scotland was catapulted from the 'margin' to the centre of postmodern sociological concern.<sup>[36]</sup>

A second tendency — more evident since the initiation of devolution in 1997 has apparently confirmed the existence of the Scottish nation as a valid object of study — has been to use theory as a salve for the problems I have already discussed, which derive from the formal structure of any attempt to give a literary history organised by reference to the writer's cultural identity. This second appeal to theory is made in order to reconcile the act of violence by which Scottish literature is seen as a closed and unified field with the diversity and tolerance demanded by liberal multiculturalism. Bakhtin has been a particular point of reference because the model of language he develops to understand works of art looks attractive if projected onto the nation.<sup>[37]</sup> Rejecting the 'essentialist' idea of a unified national tradition modelled on 'linguistic purity and homogeneity', Cairns Craig draws on Bakhtin in *The Modern Scottish Novel* to argue instead that:

the nature of a national imagination, like a language, is an unending series of interactions between different strands of tradition, between influences from within and without, between the impact of new experiences and the reinterpretation of past experiences: the nation is a series of ongoing debates, founded in institutions and patterns of life, whose elements are continually changing but which constitute, by the nature of the issues which they foreground, and by their reiteration of elements of the past, a dialogue which is unique to that particular place.<sup>[38]</sup>

Even if we accept that the aesthetic plays a role in the construction of nationhood, we may be reluctant to accept a historical account that models the nation on the work of art, and threatens to collapse political, social and cultural histories into a single line. Craig's claim to take account of diversity within tradition looks much more like the reinterpretation of nationhood according to an aesthetic view in which the vitality of the whole depends on the healthy tensions between its various parts. This is a sophisticated reinterpretation of the romantic national model, as a more recent article which defends Herder from the charge of essentialism seems to acknowledge.<sup>[39]</sup> Yet in continuing to insist that the correct context in which to study a work is a national one, and

that the locations to which traditions are tied in their 'uniqueness' are distributed as nations, the appeal to diversity rests on a limiting act of exclusion.

The Scottish literary historian who advocates 'theory' has two aims. One is the continuation of the twentieth-century Scottish intellectual's battle against kitsch and potentially oppressive stereotypes of national identity, and stresses the internal diversity and heterogeneity of Scottish literature and society, which threatens to reduce to a monolithic monoglot 'Scot'. The other is the defusing of the potentially violent self-assertion of nationalist identity when set against other groups, by insisting on the internationalist or cosmopolitan character of Scottish writing. Crawford's democratic Scottish aesthetic is exemplarily internationalist. Similarly, Berthold Schoene cites Bhabha in hoping for 'an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*'.<sup>[40]</sup> Eleanor Bell too locates the challenge for Scottish literary history in the need to 'critique the often undesirable effects of identity-thinking'.<sup>[41]</sup> The paradox of being 'national' yet 'anti-nationalist' is the challenge faced by any national literary history which seeks to face up to its political responsibilities.

Bell cites Schoene's response to the short-lived journal *Scotlands*, itself committed to a pluralist vision inspired by Bakhtin: 'While ostensibly acknowledging and even promoting cultural diversity, [the idea of plural Scotlands is] still a territorial, historically pre-encoded and hence potentially essentialist term which serves to identify, isolate and exclude both internal and external 'aliens' by clearly distinguishing what is Scottish from what is un-Scottish'.<sup>[42]</sup> Both are sensitive to the problem that the embrace of 'theory' may turn out to be a way of renewing nationalist exemplarism: the lament over Scotland's exceptional failure to become a modern nation has been replaced by a celebration of its centrality to a post-theoretical worldview. Other critics are going further in this direction, and recent work has cast doubts on the value of earlier claims about the use of post-colonial theory, and of Scotland as the heteroglossic model for a Bakhtinian literary history.<sup>[43]</sup> These are valuable warnings of the perils of theoretical nationalism; and it may be that the best version of a Scottish literary history for which we might hope would play out within this dialectic of mythologizing and demythologizing approaches. However the implications of my earlier argument are that the potential violence of nationalist literary histories cannot be redressed when the historian begins by assuming the existence of something like a national tradition. No amount of 'theory' will solve this problem: indeed, it is possible that it will make things worse.

The use of 'theory' to prop up romantic nationalist positions should not surprise us because 'theory' in this distinctive and modern sense, as Rodolphe Gasché has argued, still owes a great deal to its conceptualisation in German Romantic literary theory, which in turn depends on a specific relationship between the national and the universal:

Theory proceeds by gathering the manifold in a totalizing glance achieved by exhibiting precisely what the elements of the manifold have in common and hence makes them comparable. That which a manifold of elements, above and beyond their obvious material differences, hold in common and which permits their unification is of the order of formal universality, also called the universally human by the early Romantics. It thus comes as no surprise that the Romantics, Friedrich Schlegel in particular, conceived of comparative criticism as theory and theory period, as do many today.[\[44\]](#)

The birth of an historical discipline of aesthetics draws on two strands in eighteenth century literary thought, combining the emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual work with the growing awareness of the historicity of aesthetic judgements. Ernst Behler also sees the Schlegels as crucial precursors of modern 'theory' in this regard. Because they view historical studies as the 'science of the becoming real of all that which is practically necessary', to develop a correct aesthetic theory requires the discovery of that law which makes the variation of artworks necessary and therefore rational.[\[45\]](#) Literary history requires theoretical knowledge because the consistency of its object depends on at least a minimal conceptual identity, which must necessarily surpass any of its empirical manifestations. Literary theory requires history because only the dissemination of works across time and space can confirm the invariance of the law underlying it. Only from the basis of the speculative synthesis of these two requirements can we treat an artwork as autonomous rather than merely exemplary, and do justice to the historical evolution of art.

Or to put it another way: the Jena Romantics already face our contemporary dilemma that historicism, which threatens to dissolve literary history into a history of cultural epochs — with the consequence that it can tell us nothing about what differentiates one artwork from another — confronts a nominalist criticism which cannot forge anything other than contingent links between one artwork and another. Theoretical literary history offers to supply intermediate categories between the particular work and the universal standard, based on the relation between the work and cultural differentiation by nation and language. Culture, autonomy and freedom, can only be predicated of humanity as a whole: but they can only be realised in national contexts, of which the Greeks become the pre-eminent example.

If Gasché is correct that modern literary theory, like its romantic predecessor, depends on this totalizing perspective, deriving from the modern theoretical revision of Aristotle, we might not be surprised to find at the end of a brief critical examination of some aspects of national literary historiography nothing other than its comparative complement and completion. In the Introduction to *Scotland's Books* Robert Crawford welcomes the work of Pascale Casanova, whose *World*

*Republic of Letters* seeks to develop precisely the kind of all-inclusive interplay between comparative and national perspectives that animates the relationship between literary history and theory in the romantic line, and that pairs it with the politics of national exemplarism. Casanova has written of a 'criticism that would be both internal and external; [...] a criticism that could give a unified account of, say, the evolution of poetic forms, or the aesthetics of the novel, and their connection to the political, economic and social world'[\[46\]](#). This grand totalizing synthesis might in its turn remind us of the modern theoretical project's theological inheritance: Geoffrey Hartman hints at an even longer pedigree for these ideals when he writes that 'the nationalization of art is a cultural analogue of the Fall [...]; and true literary history, like true theology, can help to limit the curse and assure the promise'.[\[47\]](#)

David Perkins suggests that both the theory and practice of literary history 'ultimately shatters on this dilemma. We must perceive a past age as relatively unified if we are to write literary history; we must perceive it as highly diverse if what we write is to represent it plausibly'.[\[48\]](#) Recent theoretical work in Scottish literary studies has largely been concerned with a synchronic version of the same problem: of reconciling the unity imposed by the decision to work within a national frame with the diversity that that national framework itself denies, since neither the stylistic and generic possibilities available to writers, nor the commercial considerations and constraints under which they labour, need be nationally-specific. Their adoption in a particular instance is as likely to depend upon a combination of factors, of which identity may very well be neither the largest nor the most pressing. In this light the neglect of social and cultural conditions of literary production by historians working in the national style is in part the deliberate omission of facts which threaten the autonomy of the national narrative.

### III

My conclusion could be put colloquially: you can't get there from here. The earnest hopes of the Scottish literary theorists are directed at the resolution of structural problems endemic to literary history as a narrative form. But because they are structural, they simply can't be resolved without removing the national frame, since they stem from a prior decision as to which form of literary history is the most appropriate. This decision is partial: all national literary history is nationalist literary history. Certainly, to write the history of contemporary British literature from a Scottish perspective might draw attention to unexamined orthodoxies in English literary history, but as soon as such a history moves from scepticism to affirmation it must run the risk of relapsing into alternative dogmas. A nationalist history may be oppositional, but it can never be critical. The comparative solution to which we are directed by advocates of 'theory' compounds the problem, since in projecting an ideal horizon within which the deficiencies and partialities of literary

histories are redeemed, it continues to assume both the validity of taking cultural identity as a basis for political organization, and the ultimate equivalence of what might be incommensurate cultural situations.

It is the success of Scottish literary studies rather than its failures which threatens to become a trap. The literary historian, whose task depends on grouping texts in accordance with some narrative schema, will always be at odds with the literary critic who wishes to do justice to the particularity of a work of art. But not all narrative histories are either as disinterested or as accurate as each other: and when it comes to contemporary writing the revival of Scottish literary history has rested on a principle of assumed difference which falsifies the actual conditions of literary production in Scotland, and directs attention towards some styles or authors at the expense of others. There are good reasons to be concerned that a re-nationalization of criticism of contemporary British writing is bad for everyone. It distorts our understanding of texts by presuming rather than testing cultural difference, by repeatedly reducing Scottish writers to a narrow concern with identity, by foregrounding questions of national tradition at the expense of stylistic movements running across British writing, by treating national differentiation as more important than social stratification, and by falsifying the largely British (and increasingly international) context of publishing, criticism, and reception of texts.

There is a larger paradox lurking underneath the question of the link between devolution and literary history in Scotland, which would require further investigation. Richard Bradford is correct to see that something like a 'national style' in literature is possible, and that not all Scottish writers will choose to use this style in all, or any, of their works. Bradford is wrong in seeing the political significance of Kelman and Gray's writing in nationalist terms, as their fiction poses problems of political and aesthetic autonomy which cannot simply be resolved into questions of national or cultural expression. Indeed, the passage of the 'national style' from literary fiction into literary history may turn out to have been the very condition for the aesthetic success of those works on which the devolutionary literary histories of contemporary Scottish writing are based. The much-vaunted revival of Scottish literature since 1979 may in fact be nothing of the sort: that is to say, it may not be a *Scottish* revival.

The exhaustion of the national style in Scottish fiction derived from a growing perception of its injustice to the complexity of Scotland's situation, and an awareness of the iniquitous position of the intellectual whose lament for the absence of an imaginary national self-identity leads him or her to condemn the society that has failed to meet that standard. The re-emergence of the national style in literary history was enabled by the promise of justice extended by contemporary literary theory. The new emphasis is on the heterogeneity of tradition, and independence has been recast as an interdependence in relation to other cultural formations. But the minimal

condition of a Scottish literary history remains the assumed validity of the narrative identity of Scotland in time. This political imperative drives recurrent patterns of selection and evaluation which threaten to undermine the critical responsibilities of the historian.

My emphasis on the narrative dimension of historical writing should serve to indicate that I do not believe these are problems which can be overcome by turning towards a more 'scientific' model of literary history — although I have suggested that a more critical approach might take the sociological and commercial contexts of literary production as seriously as the challenge posed by the singularity of the artwork to its appropriation by a historical narrative. Indeed, one might rather look in the other direction: what I have been describing is a problem of the relationship between the form and content of a historical narrative, and perhaps literary history might look to novelists for more critical stylistic models.<sup>[49]</sup> There is however a minimum first step towards responsible literary history: to acknowledge that there is nothing natural about the national narrative; to admit that not only the object of a literary history but also its narrative form will always rest on prior decisions about the proper ends of literary and historical education; and to accept that these decisions should be declared and defended, which is to say, opened to critical challenge.

## NOTES

[1] James Chandler, 'Devolutionary Criticism: Scotland, America, and Literary Modernity', *Modern Philology* (1994), pp. 211-219, (pp. 211-2).

[2] Vernon Bogdanor, *Devolution in the United Kingdom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[3] On the rhetoric of 'new politics' see James Mitchell, 'New Parliament, New Politics in Scotland', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 53 (2000), pp. 606-621.

[4] David Perkins, 'Literary history and historicism' in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism v. 5 Romanticism*, ed. Marshall Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 338-361 (p. 343).

[5] Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* [1949] (Harmondsworth, 1963); R.S. Crane, *Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971).

[6] Lee Patterson, 'Literary History', in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, (Chicago, 1990), pp. 250-262; Linda Hutcheon, 'Rethinking the National Model' in *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, eds. Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 3-49.

- [7] Hutcheon, p. 13.
- [8] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Utility and Liability of History for Life', trans. Richard T. Gray, in *Unfashionable Observations*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 85-167.
- [9] Robert Crawford, *Scotland's Books: The Penguin History of Scottish Literature*, (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 661. Further references to this work are given in the text.
- [10] Douglas Gifford, 'Breaking Boundaries: From Modern to Contemporary in Scottish Fiction' in *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, eds. Ian Brown et. al. 3 vols (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), vol. 3, p. 237.
- [11] Berthold Schoene, 'Introduction: Post-devolution Scottish writing' in *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. Berthold Schoene (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 1-4, (p. 1).
- [12] Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 134.
- [13] Liam McIlvanney, 'The Politics of Narrative in the Post-War Scottish Novel', in *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. Zachary Leader, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 181-208, (pp. 186, 185).
- [14] Duncan Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 1.
- [15] Cairns Craig, 'Series Preface', *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture*, Determinations (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989).
- [16] Cairns Craig, 'The Criticism of Scottish Literature: Tradition, Decline and Renovation', *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, 3, p. 51.
- [17] Gerard Carruthers, 'Scottish Literature: Second Renaissance', in *Cambridge History of Twentieth Century English Literature*, eds. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 668-684, (p. 668).
- [18] See Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* [1948], trans. Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) for discussion of the topical nature of cultural discourse, and an example of the generalisation of this specific rhetorical figure to literary forms considered more broadly. For a discussion of the topical nature of historical narrative see Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, trans. Mina Moore-Rivoluceri, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
- [19] Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae: Autobiography*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 11.
- [20] Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 72.
- [21] On the relationship between history and narrative see for example: Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol.1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, (Chicago: University of Chicago

- Press, 1984); Jacques Ranciere, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- [22] Wellek and Warren, p. 40.
- [23] R.D.S. Jack raises similar concerns in his introduction to *The Mercat Anthology of Early Scottish Literature, 1375-1707*, (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1997).
- [24] c.f. Stuart Kelly, 'Canons to the left of him, canons to the right of him: Kenneth White and the constructions of Scottish literary history', *Grounding a World: Essays on the Work of Kenneth White*, eds. Gavin Bowd et. al. (Glasgow: Alba editions, 2005), pp. 186-196.
- [25] Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 173.
- [26] A.L. Kennedy, interview with Cristie Leigh March, *Edinburgh Review*, 101 (1999), pp. 99-119, (pp. 106, 105, 109, 111)
- [27] Janice Galloway, interview with Cristie Leigh March, *Edinburgh Review*, 101 (1999), pp. 85-98 (p.92).
- [28] "'Don't Imagine Ethiopia": Fiction and Poetics in Contemporary Scotland', in *Nations and Relations: Writing Across the British Isles*, eds. Tony Brown and Russell Stephens, (Cardiff: New Welsh Review, 2000), pp. 56-70; *Modern Scottish Poetry*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- [29] Andrew Crumey, 'The Public Image: Scottish Literature in the Media', *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, pp. 34-42.
- [30] For an example of the persistence of the former position see Allan Massie's introduction to Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1982).
- [31] Steven Earnshaw, 'Novel Voices', in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain: vol. 3: 1956-1999*, eds. Clive Bloom and Gary Day, (Harlow: Longman, 2000), p.72.
- [32] 'The Politics of Narrative', p. 186.
- [33] Cairns Craig, 'Scott's Staging of the Nation', *Studies in Romanticism*, 40 (2001) pp. 13-28, (p. 28).
- [34] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Another Philosophy of History and Selected Political Writings*, trans. Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), pp. 119-120.
- [35] In his review of Gregory Smith's *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919), 'Was There a Scottish Literature', in *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939*, ed. Margery Palmer McCulloch, (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004), pp. 7-10.
- [36] 'Phrasing Scotland and the Postmodern', in *Scotland in Theory*, eds. Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 69-82.
- [37] For further discussion of the use of Bakhtin in Scottish literary criticism see Matthew McGuire, 'Cultural Devolutions: Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Return of the Postmodern', in

*The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, pp. 310-318, and Alasdair Renfrew, 'Brief Encounters, Long Farewells: Bakhtin and Scottish Literature', *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 1, (2006).

[38] Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 30-31.

[39] Cairns Craig, 'Scotland and Hybridity', in *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth Century Scottish Literature*, Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair Renfrew eds., (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2004), pp. 229-253.

[40] Berthold Schoene-Harwood, 'Emerging as the others of our selves' – Scottish multiculturalism and the challenge of the body in postcolonial representation', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 25.1 (1998), pp. 54-72, (p. 57).

[41] Eleanor Bell, *Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: 2004), p. 142.

[42] Bell, p. 143.

[43] On Bakhtin see the works cited in n. 32. On the use of the postcolonial see Liam Connell, 'Modes of Marginality: Scottish Literature and the Uses of Postcolonial Theory', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23.1&2 (2003).

[44] Rodolphe Gasché, *The Honor of Thinking: Critique, Theory, Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 182.

[45] 'The Theory of Art is its own History: Herder and the Schlegel Brothers', in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer ed., *Herder Today: Contributions from the International Herder Conference* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), pp. 246-267 (p.258).

[46] Pascale Casanova, 'Literature as a World', *New Left Review*, 31 (2005), pp. 71-90, p. 72.

[47] Geoffrey Hartman, 'Toward Literary History', *Daedalus*, 99:2 (1970), pp. 355-383, p. 373.

[48] David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 27.

[49] I tend to agree with David Perkins that the 'postmodern' taste for historical compendia which foreground their own incompleteness is not a wholly satisfactory solution; indeed the current vogue for this mode might be taken as confirmation that modern 'theory' is doomed to repeat the romantic dialectic between fragmentary presence and absent totality.