

Occasional Paper: The Debt to Theory

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Letter to the Editors of *IJSL*

Dear Eleanor and Scott

The [words of Cairns Craig's](#) which you offered as a trigger for reflection risk being misinterpreted when read out of context. As it is, they imply a species of protectionism where Scottish thought is concerned which I find disquieting. What is there to stop us from roaming far and wide through the cultures and the literatures of the world, in search of insights which may prove fruitful where the immediate situation in Scotland is concerned? Unwillingness to do so could easily be read as an instance of the very inferiorism which Cairns is so eager to avoid. And why should we not be prepared to find helpful and illuminating insights where they were least expected, in contexts and situations the most apparently dissimilar from those we find ourselves dealing with? Suspicion of the foreign, and of what is all too often labelled as the cosmopolitan, is an element in several less palatable brands of nationalism, liable to be present and active on the Scottish scene as much as they are elsewhere. One reason for treating that suspicion sceptically is that the dichotomy between the foreign and the native is endemically unstable, especially when viewed in diachronic terms. The very word 'Scot' was originally applied to the Irish, and the so-called Burns stanza can be traced back, via the York cycle of English mystery plays, to the Provençal poet Guillaume of Aquitaine and medieval Latin (Catholic) hymnology.

Rather than take issue directly with what Cairns would appear to be saying, and at the risk of appearing immodest or quite simply boring, I would like to trace my own debt to theory across a period of more than thirty years. Though some quarters might argue that an excessive involvement with the foreign makes my case unrepresentative, incapable of standing the test of Scottishness, I suspect that any individual story will reveal particular nuances and strangenesses

and that, where Scottish writers, activists or intellectuals are concerned, a normative figure would be hard to find. My case also serves, I hope, to demonstrate that theory can mean a multitude of different things. For me, it was not a question of deconstructionism, or of French theory filtered through the American academic world, but rather of interaction with Italian culture and, as a result, with Slavic literature and literary studies. A longstanding fascination with music, as well as more than a decade spent teaching English as a foreign language, also played their part. If arguing from the particular means I need claim no general validity for what I have to say, expressing a debt to theory is doubly important in my case, given that during the years I spent teaching Scottish literature, I more than once heard theory being described as “not worth the paper it was written on”.

When I studied at Cambridge in the early 1970s, theory did not extend beyond Dr Johnson and Coleridge on Shakespeare, though we were encouraged to read Karl Jaspers on tragedy (I did not), and it was possible to study Plato and Plotinus as part of a paper somewhat speciously named the ‘English Moralists’. After I had moved to Rome, living with, and increasingly in, a language other than English sparked an interest in linguistics that was probably innate with me. From a general study of the history of linguistics by Mounin I progressed to André Martinet, whose manual I read from beginning to end. Though it is now somewhat out of date, the concept of the phoneme as a difference in sound used to express a difference in meaning entranced me. It explained why Italians had such difficulty in extracting the ‘ng’ sound from words like *banco* or *fango* and placing it at the end of an English word, without a following ‘g’ or ‘k’. It also, since the number of phonemes in any variant of a spoken language was finite and could be counted, introduced me to the notion of an interrelated structure, where the arrival of a new element necessarily prompted a rearrangement of all the preexisting ones. So I arrived at structuralism through linguistics. A collection of Béla Bartók’s writings on folk music edited by Diego Carpitelli, and specifically the essay on Bulgarian rhythm, which the Hungarian composer had failed to notice in recordings made as long as twenty years before, taught me that textual material will yield different elements to different observers, or to the same observer at different stages in his lifetime. And Bartók’s insistence on the constant migration of melodies among the peoples inhabiting the Carpathian basin, combined with a haunting remark by Pier Paolo Pasolini, to the effect that peasant culture is of its nature international, rather than national, inoculated me at a relatively early stage against the back to roots brand of nationalism, one which would see, for example, in the border ballads an inexhaustible store of core Scottishness, a veritable repository of national identity. Many years later, a casual remark made in conversation by Hamish Henderson reassured me that my scepticism, where the ballads were concerned, was amply justified.

My job, at the Faculty of Languages in Bari University, then later at the La Sapienza university in Rome, was to help Italian students improve their English (and I still believe that, if they found it so problematic to pronounce the initial consonant in *this* or *these*, it was because they instinctively felt it was discourteous to bring the tongue so close to the front of the mouth while speaking). The intellectual world I came into contact with, however, as my command of Italian improved, was puzzling, stimulating and profoundly politicised. Until 1989 Italy was in many respects an Iron Curtain country, in the sense of being a country whose political and cultural life was strongly marked by a geographical position neighbouring the nations of Europe subjected, in the wake of military occupation, to the dubious benefits of communism imposed from above. The Italian communist party was locked in perpetual opposition, but gathered in its ranks many of the nation's most responsible, civically concerned and forward-looking individuals. This was noticeably the case in a university arts department. The moral and intellectual role of the Italian communist party also ensured that there would be a constant stream of up to date, high quality translations of material from Russian and other Slavonic languages. It was symptomatic that students were encouraged to buy, and required to read Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, in full, in scrupulous versions made from the original, whereas in English language universities they might be referred to a couple of paragraphs in a manual by Terry Eagleton, or to a Bakhtin reader whose editor made no claim to even a superficial acquaintance with the texts in their original language.

And so I noticed students carrying around an anthology of writings by the Russian formalists, edited by Tzvetan Todorov, originally published in French. This was where I first made the acquaintance of Jakobson and of Viktor Shklovsky. It was Shklovsky who helped me realise that a novel has a shape, and led me years later to disconcert a classroom of Glasgow students, inured to naïve psychologism (where you would evaluate the make-up and the behaviour of the characters as if they were friends, or else the people living next door) or to moralistic criticism of the English Protestant variety (the idea that reading novels can in some obscure fashion make you a better person) by asking them how they would describe the shape of the novel they had just finished reading. Was it long and thin? Or short and fat? Did it have bumps in the middle? And were the bumps all the same, or of different sizes? Shklovsky's delightful diagrams of the narrative progress of *Tristram Shandy* had done their work. Most provocative and, in the end, most fruitful of all was my encounter with Tynjanov. During an interminably protracted degree exam session (oral and so face to face, like the majority of university exams in Italy at that time) I noticed an especially glamorous colleague, who would later become a fiction writer of repute, fiddling with her copy of *The Problem of Poetic Language*. The English version of this text, published in the States, is so convoluted as to be, where I am concerned, practically incomprehensible. But I managed to battle my way through the Italian. Tynjanov not only spelt out for me the way in which poetry, differently from prose, sets resonating the second, third and

fourth semantic values of a word, and not just the one required by that context. He convinced me that onomatopoeia, the sound painting I had been taught since studying Tennyson at school to seek for in every poetic text I examined, was the exception rather than the rule, that it was, indeed, alien to the specific way in which poetry orders language. Then there was the fascinating, destabilising suggestion that, in fiction, character could be a function of situation, and even of dialogue, rather than the other way round. Many years later when, working on my first novel to be published, I split a single character into two because I wanted him both to commit suicide and not to, Tynjanov would come back into my mind.

In the course of time, though this was strictly speaking far beyond my duties, I was allowed to help supervise Italian students preparing their degree theses. This was how I discovered Todorov's *The Fantastic*, which I picked up in Paris, in French, in the course of a train journey home to Scotland, along with a collection of essays by Jakobson entitled *Questions de poétique*. It was Todorov who made me so impatient with the old, eternally recycled chestnut about Hogg's *Justified Sinner*, setting students to amass evidence for and against Robert Wringhim's accomplice actually being the devil and encouraging them to choose once and for all between the psychological and the mythical interpretations of the text (or else to retreat in frustration at the near impossibility of doing so). Todorov made it obvious that such ambivalence was characteristic of the genre, was, indeed, a condition of the novel's generic cohesion.

But the student to whom I owe the greatest debt of gratitude was one who (I am talking about the early 1980s) wrote her thesis on Bakhtin and Walter Scott. Because of her, I read Bakhtin in full, in Italian translation, and was forced laboriously to track down the English versions when I came to publish articles using his work. It proved impossible to get my hands, in the library university at Glasgow or in the National Library in Edinburgh, on the Russian originals. And so I was unable to substantiate a distinct impression that where, in his Rabelais book, Bakhtin repeatedly waxes lyrical about the genital area, about faeces and semen, Helen Iswolsky had operated a discreet bowdlerisation in her English translation. I felt certain, however, that the Italian *pluridiscorsività* (plurality of discourses) was infinitely preferable to her choice of 'heteroglossia' (which, if it does not set the reader thinking of glossy magazines, at the very least implies that a sort of speech named homoglossia needs to be set alongside it). And her choice of 'degradation' where the Italian had *abbassamento* (simply 'lowering'), with reference to Bakhtin's attempt to redress the balance, in post-Renaissance, bourgeois European discourse, between the head and the crotch or the anus, struck me as similarly problematic. Bakhtin must have heard of Burns. But I suspect he knew very little about the other poets of the Vernacular Revival, or about the Christ's Kirk tradition. Yet when I came to teach, and write about these texts, or about the agricultural idylls of Burns and Fergusson, it was Bakhtin's work on both Rabelais and Dostoevsky which led me to unlock insights that might otherwise have proved inaccessible.

Far more difficult than Bakhtin, but equally rewarding of effort, was another Russian text to be found on bookshop shelves in Rome, but which subsists in English only in a hard to track down North American translation, Jurij Lotman's *The Structure of the Poetic Text*. Lotman's listing of the variant adjectives in a line by Pushkin finally demonstrated to me how, in poetry, the choice of a word can be governed by phonetic rather than semantic considerations, thus demonstrating that the semantics of poetry is different from that of prose, that language in poetry functions in a different way. His reading of Tsvetaeva's poem about the panther and the cave (the third of her 'Verses to an Orphan') was an object lesson in the study of phonetic patterning (always easier to discern in a foreign language than in one's own). When introducing the poetry module for first year Glasgow Scottish Literature students, I repeatedly drew on Lotman's work, and remain hopeful that, however simplified and watered down, something of what he had to say got through to them.

It was in 1991, by which time I was already on the staff at Glasgow, that I rather bravely (I had been in a permanent post for less than a year) made the journey south to take part in a conference on gay and lesbian studies at London University, with a paper on Almodóvar's *The Law of Desire*. In a bookshop there I happened upon and pounced on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, which was to provide the inspiration for a module on gender and sexuality taught on three separate occasions as well as, ultimately, for a volume of essays edited in 1995, *Gendering the Nation*. Two years before, I had mischievously quoted her in the epigraph to an article on Burns's 'Tam o' Shanter'. I still cannot be sure how many of its readers guessed the amount of fun that I was having. Her book gave me the courage to commit to print my serious misgivings about Neil Gunn's fiction and helped me clarify and motivate the admiration I had long felt for MacDiarmid's treatment of (dysfunctional or barely functional – other kinds presumably do exist) male sexuality in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. It was not merely that, in her brilliant opening series of axioms (admittedly obfuscated by a not always helpful use of jargon) she seemed prepared to take astrology seriously. J.M. Barrie was approached from an innovative, unprecedented angle, and the triumvirate of gender, sex and sexuality offered a new and deeply needed axis of reading to counterpoint the well-used, already tiring axis of revivalist cultural nationalism, with its sad addiction to victim positioning (the twin disasters of 1603 & 1707). By the time I came to repeat the module, Irvine Welsh had reached iconic status with his *Trainspotting*. If Kosofsky Sedgwick supported me in articulating the revulsion I experienced at this recrudescence of diseased and damaged masculinity, at its claim to return centre stage at the expense of all other voices, students also strengthened the case I was trying to make (and notably the woman who commented, à propos of the Z campaign which figures in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, that 'The point of the Z campaign is there can be no excuse – and this book is one long excuse!')

Returning to where we came in, during those first years in Italy I picked up a copy of *Semiotics of Popular Culture* by Peter Bogatyrëv of the Prague school (though I could make nothing of Mukařovský, however hard I tried), then progressed to Vladimir Propp, his *Morphology of the Folktale* and the more problematic *Historical Roots of Wonder Tales*. If my status as an out gay man made it perhaps inevitable that I should deal with gender and sexuality in my teaching, the realisation that I was also drawn to these topics through having experienced sexual abuse within a family context made me feel I had perhaps spent sufficient time on those particular barricades. So I put together a module on narratology, where I began by encouraging groups of students to examine Gaelic folktales from the collections of John Campbell of Islay in the light of Propp's functions. This was a huge success, with several seminars developing into a sort of not excessively wild party game. We were then able to consider the importance of those same functions in *The Lady of the Lake* and in *Redgauntlet*, before going on to use Genette's *Narrative Discourse* in teasing out the narrative complexity of that wonderfully warm and sophisticated book, Naomi Mitchison's *The Bull Calves*. Here again I had to transfer the underlinings from my Italian text of *Figures III* to the American edition.

At the close of that module, I asked students to note that I had given five lectures in a row without ever using the word 'Scottish'. They were mystified. But the point remained extremely important for me. And here I would like to return to the implications of the remarks by Cairns you offered, whether or not these reflect his actual position, or his position at the present moment. To begin with, theory gives us the opportunity to contextualise readings of Scottish material that have been powered by nationalist ideology. It allows us to take a break, to get a breather. Insistence on the specificities of our Scottishness, like identity politics of any kind, risks enclosing us within a ghetto of our own making, one which can become stifling and suffocating, and where we are likely to grow increasingly impatient with the company we have been forced to keep. But theory can offer infinitely more than a palliative or a diversion. One way or the other, for better or for worse, in the course of the twentieth century the discourse about Scottish literature was intricately linked with political nationalism and with the campaign for political autonomy. As far as I am concerned, the single greatest, indeed tragic lack within that discourse, and I am also talking about the present here, is of any reflection on the particular brands of nationalist ideology deployed, even the simplest attempt to contextualise them, to set them within the broader picture of nationalism and identity politics as a whole. As long as people continue to claim that the battle for Scottishness or the discourse about Scotland are axiomatic and natural, placing them beyond question or discussion, then the strategies deployed will also be placed beyond choice. The essence of a genuinely critical discourse is that it should be selective and should enable selectivity. One approach or insight can be replaced or corroborated by another, mistakes can be rectified, differences of opinion accommodated and developed. How this can be done if we confine our interpretive tools and our choice of intellectual input to figures who are provably Scottish is an

enigma to me. That consideration, as much as any other, makes me determined to oppose the implications (intentional or otherwise) of Cairns' words, to the extent that it is in my power to do so.

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