EDITOR'S NOTE

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Scottish Literature: Representing the Nation in the Age of the Post-National

Writing in 2006, the Scottish poet and academic Robert Crawford mused: “A small northern country with a present-day population of five million, Scotland, through its authors, has played an improbably large part in world literature” (Scotland’s Books 4). Similarly, the editors of the monumental Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, published in 2007, started their introductory chapter by noticing its merely recent “coming of age as a subject of serious critical study” (Brown et al. 3). In 2021, with both Scottish culture and politics at the center of attention in post-Brexit Europe, with Scottish studies firmly established as a field of scholarly interest, and classes on Scottish works taught in universities all over the globe, the impact of “Scotland’s books” may seem less unlikely; rather, it appears as the inevitable consequence of their unique positioning at the intersection of geopolitics with world literature. Ever since the 18th century and the burst of James MacPherson’s Ossianic cycle onto the scene of budding European Romanticism, followed by Walter Scott’s invention of the genre of the historical novel a few decades later, Scottish writing has gone into and out of the limelight, it has been variously appropriated or adapted (most notably, by “English literature”), it has been fiercely castigated by its own exponents, but it has always provided matter for dispute. It is the very intensity of the debate that proves its continuity and aliveness: even when the very existence of such a phenomenon as “Scottish literature” was doubted – for instance, by T.S. Eliot (1919/2004), or by Edwin Muir’s dismissal of the heterogeneity of Scotland’s languages and tradition (1938) – its detractors were reacting to the claims of an emerging, vociferous canon. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, it had become clear that the force of this canon

resided in precisely the multifariousness, plurilingualism and adaptability that had attracted Eliot's and Muir's disapproval.

As the editors of the Edinburgh History are keen to point out, Scottish literature extends further than its national languages: "not simply the three most often cited (Scots, Gaelic and English), but also in earlier times in Norse, Latin, French and Brythonic languages including Welsh" (Brown et al. 11); correspondingly, it comprises a rich assortment of diasporic texts and an ongoing dialogue with other cultures. Reading Scottish literature against the urgency of the times may offer a unique view on the complexities of our particular historical juncture, and on the long-term developments that have shaped it. Ambivalently situated both at the center and the margin of world culture, recent Scottish fiction condenses many of the contradictions inherent to the spatial and temporal configurations of the contemporary. Arguably, it has always done so. However, its current, unprecedented effervescence, in terms of readerly consumption and critical scrutiny alike, casts a fresh light on its capacity to stage the tensions between the local and the planetary, the national and the postnational, tradition and modernity, the summoning of various pasts and the projection of possible futures. Its centrality is demonstrated by its popularity, and founded on an exploration of radically experimental forms, politically and ethically invested themes, and generic variety. Its peripherality (though relative within the arena of world culture, and much more poignant in the case of the texts written in Gaelic or Scots) has been effectively turned into an aesthetic and political instrument for affirmation.

Scottish writing draws its energies from an assertion of place, seen in relation to the liquefying forces of the world's economic and political history. A case in point is Shuggie Bain, the Booker prize-winning debut novel of the New York-based author Douglas Stuart, inspired by the author's own experience of growing up in Glasgow under Thatcherism. Resolutely "local" in its form and content, reenergizing the tropes of the working-class realism that has become a marker of the Scottish novel, and explicitly drawing on James Kelman's aesthetic revalorization of disempowered voices, Shuggie Bain investigates the historical entanglements of its protagonists' fates, but keeps away from overt political engagement with the nation-building efforts of the period it is set in, or from simplistic guilt assignment, as it speaks to an international audience by addressing "universal" topical issues.

Alternatively, there is also the wide success of authors such as Ali Smith, whose involvement with the immediate present in the “Seasonal Quartet” (through the themes of Brexit, immigration, climate change and the pandemic) harks back to the cosmopolitan modernist transmutation of volatility and instability into aesthetic figurations of global experience. Such reconsiderations of the status of the author are not only evidence of the refusal of the subaltern status of Scottish literature, but also implicit problematizations of the grand narrative of national representation. While much of Scottish writing in the aftermath of the 1979 failed devolution referendum is driven by the imperative to achieve cultural and political independence, there is also a marked awareness of the need to free culture from the dominance of other types of discourse in order to preserve its emancipatory potential of “resistance.”

*It is perhaps for this reason that the contributions to the present issue of American, British and Canadian Studies tend to veer away from the overtly political towards a consideration of the ethical concerns of recent Scottish novels. Carmen Borbely’s essay firmly anchors the investigation of Scottish fiction within the span of the global imaginary and its recent materially-minded inflexions. Focusing on Jackie Kay’s only novel to date, Borbely traces the emergence of Black versions of Scottishness via the imbrications of (human) subjects and (nonhuman) objects during the work of mourning. The author takes a less trodden path towards the interpretation of former Scots Makar Kay’s *Trumpet* and its fictional rendition of the real-life story of a twentieth-century jazz musician, who lived life as a man and was only posthumously exposed to be physically female. Read through the lenses of a posthumanist approach to the relations between grieving selves and the memorial/memorious things sustaining them, *Trumpet*, through its polyphonic, jazz-like mosaic of voices, paints the picture of a shared vulnerability, simultaneously individual and collective, capable of rescuing a communal past from the hegemony of traditional narratives about origins and reinscribe a migratory, interstitial form of Scottishness within the texture of modernity.*

*Andrei Popa’s essay tackles the work of one of the most sophisticated and exciting contemporary writers, Ali Smith, whose *There But For The* sheds light on an enduring concern of Scottish fiction: the ethical nature of our encounters with others, set against the dispersal of community under the historical pressures of commodification and homogenization. While not overtly “Scottish” in terms of*

either themes or narrative conventions, the novel can be situated in a tradition inaugurated by James Hogg's 'The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner' and continued by Muriel Spark's 'The Ballad of Peckham Rye, which deals with the disruptive arrival of a stranger within the boundaries of self-assured and ossified communities. Andrei Popa's analysis of 'There But For The' focuses on scenarios of welcoming in which hospitality, or its absence, towards the unexpected guest, is rehearsed in various guises, configuring the possibility of a future (or rather, futures) defined by radical opening towards alterity, rather than its instrumentalization or weaponization.

My own contribution continues the exploration of the ethical vein of Scottish writing via a reading of Muriel Spark's 'Loitering with Intent' as a staging of the unavoidable antinomies involved in the moral imperative of narrating the lives of others, which is always accompanied by the danger of subordinating their singularity to the storyteller's set of values or forms of normalized identity. My insistence on Spark's Scottishness is meant not to contradict her self-confessed cosmopolitanism or her refusal to accept narrow nationalistic labels, but rather to trace one of the possible origins of her acute awareness of the responsibility incumbent on the author as the origin of discourse, as well as of storytelling's capacity to project realities which, if not counteracted by a plurality of positions, possess the potential to become dystopian. Using recent approaches to literary ethics, I outline the overlapping in Spark's novel between (auto)biographical writing as authorial "care" and writing as "loitering with [the malicious] intent" of domesticating and appropriating the lives of others.

The next contribution, Andrei Zamfirescu's "Violence, Innocence and Redemption in Irvine Welsh's 'Chemical Mythos,'" draws on a particularly popular dimension of recent Scottish fiction – Welsh's celebration-cum-critique of the working-class culture of dissent and transgression. Zamfirescu anchors it within a mythical cosmology which revives archaic tropes and ritualistic gestures while insisting on a corporeal, even empirical experience. Focusing on the author's later, lesser-known novels, such as 'A Decent Ride, Filth, The Blade Artist or Crime, the essay contours the topography of the "chemical generation," defined by the attempt to escape the suffocating environments of Scottish urban life in search for an ideal of authenticity celebrated by Welsh, but reached only by a few of his

protagonists. The novels turn out to share with ancient myth narrative patterns and loci essentially concerned with moral awareness or moral failure, which it nevertheless exploits to create a decidedly non-metaphysical ethos.

Indrajit Patra investigates one of the trademarks of Scottish genre writing, science fiction, illustrated by Ken MacLeod's Corporation Trilogy, a vast saga that becomes the pretext for a complex philosophy of history, complete with a meditation upon the effects of technological mutations triggering the advent of posthumanity. Patra explores MacLeod's staging of the ethical consequences incurred by the technological decentering of the human, culminating in the blurring of the distinction between the real and the virtual and the emergence of machine consciousness. Nevertheless, the advent of posthumanity fails to quell, but rather reinforces, the age-old conflict embodied by the Hegelian master-slave dialectic.

This diverse set of perspectives is completed by an interview with one of the most distinguished representatives of the Scottish academia, literary historian and theorist Randall Stevenson. If Robert Crawford (1998) was right and the Scots did "invent" the discipline of English literature, Stevenson's work may be the best illustration of this tradition, given its shaping of the way generations of scholars have interpreted modernist or postmodernist writing in English. The interview granted to Adriana Neagu covers a wide range of themes reflecting a prolific academic output, from the relationship between art and science, the responsibility of the literary historian, theorist and critic when faced with the current, momentous shifts in paradigms of thought, or the novel's impact on the world.

In the last piece of the issue, Scotland goes global: a "postcard" from Nova Scotia brings to the fore its historical and geographical entanglements with the rest of the world. David Howard's constellation of viewpoints on what it means to be at home in modernity serves as a fitting reminder that "home," just like the "nation," can be simultaneously utopian and dystopian. Although founded on a refusal of homeliness, recent Scottish literature has offered a home to new forms of identity and for political, ethical and esthetical reflection; and, in the process, it has become at home in the world.

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