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Scott Hames. *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution: Voice, Class, Nation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. Pp. 336. ISBN: 9781474418140 (paperback).

Scott Hames's *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution: Voice, Class, Nation* represents a meticulous and insightful study of the entanglements of Scottish devolutionary politics and Scottish culture, focusing on the period leading to the establishment of the new Holyrood Parliament in 1999. Not least among its merits one can list its minute investigation of several tense and contentious decades in Scotland's recent literary history, and its willingness to engage in a lucid analysis of persistent national myths. The central question Hames examines concerns the much-vaunted relationship between the process of political devolution and literature's formulation of newly canonical versions of Scottishness. Across the seven chapters, the answer comes in the form of a major contribution to our understanding of Scottish cultural politics, relying on works and arguments provided by several generations of writers, intellectuals, journalists, and politicians engaged in the project of creating a new Scotland. Through a varied range of ideas and examples (drawn from literature, poetry, political discourse, debates on gender status), Hames pursues the many analogies and interactions between the two dimensions, suggesting that if devolution really is about the "management of cultural difference," it should also be considered a political demand for collective agency (36).

In the introductory chapter Hames defines two competing narratives of devolution, which will provide the grounding concepts of his investigation. The first is a concerted artistic project dubbed as "the Dream," "a story of cultural vanguardism in which writers and artists play the starring role in the recuperation of national identity, cultural

confidence and democratic agency.” The second is its political counterpart, “the Grind,” describing the “history of devolution as a shrewd and sometimes grubby saga of electoral expediency” (xii). The author’s confessed aim is to explore what stands “beyond” the border between culture and politics in order to describe “not the hopeful future made possible by Scottish devolution, but the logic of its historical emergence” (39). The two “divergent stories,” (41) “the Dream” of national empowerment and “the Grind” of electoral strategy, are placed in a tense dialogue. That their relationship is not a straightforward one is proved by one of Hames’s starting points, a remark made by Douglas Gifford 1999. Gifford pointed to a historical paradox: while during the 1920s and 1930s, nationalistic cultural effervescence produced no political effects in terms of membership in the British parliament, the sustained interest in the international, non-Scottish contexts of local writing evinced by writers active during the 1970s “resulted” in a number of MPs (Gifford qtd. in Hames 38). Even though much of the book is occupied with contesting the direct causal relation between literary nationalism and political action, it is nevertheless conceived as an answer to Gifford’s query by examining the period between 1979 (the year of the first, failed devolution referendum) and the inauguration of the Scottish parliament in 1999. In order to reach this answer, Hames follows three main investigative strands: a critique of the “self-thwarting tendencies” (12) of the politics of recognition (including Scottish devolutionary demands) that seeks confirmation of an essentialized identity based on complaint from the very state that has inflicted the damage; a cautionary tale about the danger of statist, totalizing appropriation of literary representations of nationhood; and the competing narratives of cultural affirmation of “authentic,” “vernacular” Scottishness versus political devolution as merely the “self-preservation of the UK constitutional order” (13).

A detour through the “print culture of the Edinburgh intelligentsia” (41) during the last two decades of the twentieth century allows Hames to begin his perusal of the entanglements of cultural “dreams” and political “grinds.” Hames subscribes to Rory Scothorne’s suggestion that such publications are extremely important as a sign of “renewed engagement” (133) with the Scottish nation, as well as a “bridge across which radical

intellectuals were able to reach a secure sense of their place and role in a newly politicized Scottish nation” (Scothorne qtd. in Hames 133). Magazines such as *Radical Scotland*, *Cencrastus* and *The Edinburgh Review* became as “testing ground” (133) for the literary trope of “voicing” the will of the people and the effectiveness of cultural products as political weapons. They offered an opportunity for scholars and writers such as Cairns Craig, Alasdair Gray, Tom Leonard or James Robertson to produce an image of Scottish “authentic” difference based on class as much as on linguistic and ethnic specificity. The emergence of such “claims of right” (163) articulated by an intellectual elite (196) for self-determination and self-government occupies the bulk of chapters 3 and 4 of the book.

One of the major points of interest of Hames’s study consists in his tracing of the complex interactions among thinkers and artists belonging to the two distinct periods of the Scottish literary revival (the initial, interwar Celtic Renaissance, and the post-1979 wave), and their various attitudes towards both devolution and the literary canon. For instance, an important difference had already become glaring during the late 1960s, when one of Hugh MacDiarmid’s ardent admirers, Tom Scott, expressed his lack of confidence in the *Scottish International* – the first magazine to publish works by Alasdair Gray and Tom Leonard, as well as a venue for the political writing of Tom Nairn – naming it “ludicrous” and condemning its editors for supporting new, experimental art, such as Ian Hamilton Finlay’s concrete poetry. This, however, did not curb the energies of either narrative experimentation, or political investment, as proved by Hames’s analysis, in the fifth chapter, of James Robertson’s epic historical novel *And the Land Lay Still* (2010), “the crowning achievement of the ‘new renaissance’” (229). A work that assembles personal “scraps and fragments” of identity into the “larger mosaic” (220) of the national story of devolution, Robertson’s novel is seen as an attempt at “historical recovery and production which nationalizes the individual subject while figuring the nation both as spectral nobodies ‘down there’, and the very horizon of meaningful combination” (230).

The last two chapters focus on “language nationalism” and the emergence of “Scottish language(s) as a medium of national

empowerment and display” (233), and the valorization of literary “voice” as a trope of representativity in the works of Irvine Welsh, A.L. Kennedy and James Kelman. Following Pascale Casanova and her investigation of the crystallization of “national literary space” through the distinctiveness of national idioms, Hames shows that the contradictions raised by Scottish writing necessarily defining itself both in the proximity of, and against, English were solved by “[e]ffectively transmuting *class into race*” and foregrounding Scots as a “marker of *subjection-as-tradition*” (260) taken as the ground for renewed political demands. The image of “proletarianized Scotland,” “marginalized and dispossessed by Thatcherism” (146) that becomes the token for national authenticity mobilizes important leftist energies, but runs the risk of eliding the persistence of social hierarchies and reinforcing the working classes dependence on the elite. The final chapter, dedicated to “devolution as a spectacle of voice” (265) tackles the imbrications between novelistic and parliamentary modes of representativity, often overlapping in a romanticized and exalted figuration of “‘voice’ as a principle of recuperated national substance and presence” (267). The trope of “voice” may end up occluding what Hames considers to be the curtailed power of the Scottish parliament (267), or pointing to the breaking apart of communal ties, rather than the coming together of social texture (269). A case in point is the writing of James Kelman, taken to embody the absolute refusal of societal integration and to “constitute” “voice as the medium of [individual] being” (289), rather than that of nationhood.

Certainly, *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution: Voice, Class, Nation* is original, thoughtful, and thought-provoking, encouraging the reader to re-evaluate the interactions between Scottish literary culture and Scottish nationalism during the twentieth century. One of the numerous merits of this finely researched book is to actually participate in the “optimistic energies of the new Scotland” (305), while nevertheless remaining a lucid examination of the critical filters that produce and evaluate Scottish literature.

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