

Glocalising Scottish literature: a call for new strategies of reading

By Carla Sassi

Introduction

As heralded by many observers and scholars, the 1999 reinstatement of the Scottish Parliament marked an important turning point in the field of Scottish studies. Among others, Caroline McCracken-Flesher pointed out how the forces underpinning the creation of the Parliament 'are also cultural, therefore constantly alive and insistently creative' and that 'Scotland may seem delimited by, but equally lives within and moves forward and outward through its signs and stories',¹ while Berthold Schoene remarked, along comparable lines, that 'devolution has changed and will continue to change Scotland's structure(s) of feeling', observing that 'the nation's present preoccupations and priorities are bound to differ markedly from late 20th-century political concerns'.² The post-devolutionary decade has indeed been characterised by a dynamic, creatively fruitful dialogue between political and poetic imagination, as witnessed in the pre-referendum debate among Scotland's leading writers and artists.³ It has also witnessed a meaningful transition towards a more complex theoretical articulation of Scottish studies as a field of academic investigation, both through the involvement of a growing number of scholars (within and outwith Britain) and in terms of a wider international disciplinary recognition. Within Scotland, it has also fostered an unprecedentedly wide debate on the institutionalisation of the study of Scottish literature, leading to the recent introduction of a compulsory question on Scottish literature in the Higher English exam.

If a central tension may be identified today, in the academic as well as in the public debate over the disciplinary definition of Scottish literature, this is no doubt between the 'national' and the 'post-national' paradigms (terms which are used here as working definitions), not infrequently constructed as antagonistic and mutually exclusive. Anyone who has worked in the field of Scottish literature in the last ten years or so is aware that this only too often entrenched polarisation

has represented a worrying impasse, reverberating in recent popular debates on Scottish/British media over the institutionalisation of Scottish literature in Scottish schools—where Scottish literature is often idealised as the imaginative reservoir of the Scottish nation, or alternatively belittled as a ‘provincial’ construct, in stark contrast to the ‘cosmopolitan’ one of English literature. Such a critical fault-line can no doubt be seen as the legacy of the entrenched culturalist rejection of nationalism as an essentialist expression, fostering ethnic friction and conflicts, with culture as its founding ideology and literature as its active disseminatory agent, and yet, it finds its deeper roots in the intra-British discourse that shaped both the Scottish and the English literary canons.⁴ It is in fact worthwhile to stress here that Scottish literature, as a recognised independent academic field of inquiry, is still a very young one, and—until very recently—also a fiercely contested one. Scottish literature, as an academic field of investigation, was largely shaped in Britain between the 50s and 90s, in a climate of bitter internal political/cultural antagonism (effectively represented in James Robertson’s bestselling novel, *And the Land Lay Still*, 2010) and largely in isolation from parallel debates and theorisations on ‘small nations’, stateless nations or minority cultures in continental Europe, or indeed from other theoretical orientations accounting for hegemonic relations between cultures. It would be naively unrealistic to contend that this complex and on the whole unfavourable ideological climate did not have or should not have had a significant impact on the shaping discourse of Scottish literature. It would be equally naive to contend that such discourse was articulated exclusively within Scotland—as it is indeed the outcome of a complex dialogue with the other nations of the British archipelago. And yet, for all its problematicity, it would be wrong and unproductive to shake off this specific disciplinary history: as most contested histories, even this might fruitfully become the source of theoretical insight, as well as of renovation.

Beyond this specific intra-British dimension there are, however, further reasons for disciplinary concern. Among these, the difficulty for a ‘small’ nation’s literature to find a paradigmatic *ubi consistam* in the contemporary panorama of the globalized humanities, other than the blending into more established macro-areas such as, for example (besides ‘English’ literature) World literature or Postcolonial studies. It is worthwhile to remember here that this is indeed the strategy of ‘survival’ opted out by Irish studies, which has gained international visibility under the aegis of a distinctly postcolonial paradigm. Survival, however,

in this case, may come at some price—the loss of disciplinary specificity and, possibly, disciplinary dissolution.

The terms of the dilemma are then clear. Should we further mark and defend the specific territory of our academic inquiry, or should we give up gradually our disciplinary borders, and merge into wider, archipelagic or global perspectives? Should the adjective ‘Scottish’ function as a centre of gravity, coalescing texts and authors into a consistent design, or should it stand as a mere vestige of national meaning, ready to be eventually dropped altogether, leaving texts and authors floating free? Each option, in its extreme form, engenders its own specific brand of disciplinary risk—respectively that of isolation and that of dissolution.

So, where do we go from here?

New strategies of reading Scottish texts

The outlook for the future is perhaps not so bleak as it may seem. It can in fact be contended that the above-described dilemma lies more in the compartmentalisation of schools of thought and, in general, of humanistic knowledge, than in the actual conflict between irreconcilable approaches. In this sense, a way out might indeed be indirectly offered by the recent crisis and revision of the Cultural studies paradigm, heralded by, among others, Jan Baetens:

We are entering new and post-cultural studies paradigms, but, of course, this does not mean that cultural studies will vanish from the field, on the contrary [...] what it does mean [...] is that cultural studies will have to reposition itself within the ever moving and shifting field of the humanities, instead of taking for granted, as some theoreticians used to believe around 1990, that the only future of the humanities will be that of cultural studies itself.⁵

Such paradigm shift, defined here in terms of a pluralistic re-articulation and of an enhanced flexibility and openness to new developments in the field of humanities, opens up the possibility of a ‘reconciliation’ with local-based fields of investigation such as Scottish studies. A reconciliation that seems more viable also in the light of the pluralistic re-articulation (in the sense of a more thoughtful listening of different critical voices within and outwith our field of specialisation) also occurring within Scottish studies.

In this changed and changing context, a critical revision (rather than a suppression) of the 'national' as one of the viable categories of cultural analysis, seems the likeliest option. In a post-culturalist perspective, in fact, nationalist agendas are being reconsidered insofar as they provide a line of resistance against what Negri and Hardt have termed 'Empire',⁶ as well as engage with local forms of knowledge and memory, thus protecting cultural 'biodiversity' against homogenising globalisation. And as for the concept of nation, it may be worthwhile to point out that Cultural studies, as well as the related fields of Postcolonialism and Feminism, have never entirely rejected it as a critical/political category. The 'local', of which the 'national' may be seen as an expression, responds to what has been described as a fundamental human need for group identity and pattern-making,⁷ and it has been deployed at different times as a tool for demystifying universal reason and ideologies (Stuart Hall), as a line or resistance against imperialisms (Edward Said), and even as an essential building block of cosmopolitanism.⁸ What Cultural studies (as well as Postcolonialism and Feminism) has taught us, is to value and yet relativise the local, to de-familiarise it by bending it towards new, productive uses.

It is with a renewed sense of the 'local' and of the 'global', but also of their interconnectedness—in Susan Friedman Stanford's words, 'the dynamic, dialogic, contrapuntal, or even dialectical interaction of the global and the local'⁹—that we should re-read Scottish texts, to free them from the strictures of the canonical discourse of the nation, and at the same time to rescue disciplinary specificities. Our task, then, is that of locating new reading strategies that take into account, if only by questioning and problematising, both the national literature paradigm and the cosmopolitan agenda of the 'new' World literature studies.

So, what 'new reading strategies' should be fruitfully deployed for a re-theorisation of Scottish literature? What follows is a merely suggestive list of four practices that might be fruitfully used in re-thinking our field of studies, adapted from Friedman's theoretical work and based on my own experience as a researcher in this field:

1. De-contextualizing or displacing Scottish texts

As someone who has been involved in/designed two research projects on

'Caribbean-Scottish Relations' (in 2006 and 2008 respectively¹⁰), I have learnt the value of working on what I have described as a 'destabilising *lieu de memoire*'. The Caribbean, in this specific context, is where Scotland 'eventually lose[s] command of its own narrative of identity, but also the place onto which Scotland might fruitfully "displace" itself, and thus put into question its most resilient identity myths'.¹¹ The post/colonial contact zone is of course just one example of de-contextualization that may indeed lead to new ways of making sense of Scottish literary texts and cultural expressions.

2. Re-visioning the canon

In the course of the 20th century a Scottish, 'devolved' canon emerged, while a 'cryptic' (and sometimes conflicting) Scottish 'sub-canon' remained inscribed in 'English' literature—both, for different and yet related reasons, were shaped by narrow taxonomic criteria.¹² In order to reach a new vision, we should challenge the boundaries of such constructions, and go against the very grain of the canon by retrieving texts that do not conform to our disciplinary expectations. How much would the understanding of the 'Scottish Renaissance' change, for example, if we switched our attention from the canonical writers and texts that have so far attracted the attention of scholars, to 'minor' ones? Say, from Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* to Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*?

3. Appraising the agency of literary texts

Texts participate in the issues they raise, they produce theory, and should not be confined to the role of objects of interpretation. Yet, it is not uncommon that, in an attempt to make a text speak through a pre-set theoretical grid, critics overlook or mortify its 'textness'. As the discourse of Scottish literature originally developed in a climate of bitter political/cultural antagonism, how many layers of (conflicting) ideologies have accumulated on Scottish texts, obfuscating their complexity? And how many are still cryptically clinging to them?

4. 'Paratactic reading' or 'Collage'

Finally, I wish to borrow and adapt a strategy devised by Friedman in reference to her theory of transnational narrative. Friedman envisages 'an archive of radical juxtaposition, through the paratactic cutting and pasting of narratives that are not

typically read together'. This:

establishes a montage of differences where setting texts side by side illuminates those differences at the same time that it spotlights commonalities. [...] The in/commensurabilities of narratives set in relation can come into play, thus giving attention to the global and the local, what is shared and what is particular, and the dynamic tension between them.¹³

Paratactic reading, as a strategy of defamiliarisation and cultural critique, may indeed engender new ways of interrogating Scottish literature, and of transcending the worrying polarisation mentioned at the beginning of this article. Many modern and contemporary Scottish texts (if read against the grain of canonical interpretations) indeed make sense of the local by integrating it within a planetary strategy—they are able to generate 'worldness' within a revised and problematized national paradigm.

By way of conclusion: in order to identify multiple meanings, local and global, and thus make of Scottish literature a cutting-edge category that intervenes in other categories, we do have to turn to multiple reading strategies. This is not, therefore, a call for the suppression of local, nationalist or 'conventional' agendas, it is a call for dialogue, at the sign of pluralism.

References & Further Information

¹ Caroline McCracken-Flesher, 'Introduction', in *Culture, Nation, and the New Scottish Parliament* (Bucknell University Press, 2007) p.9.

² Berthold Schoene, 'Introduction', *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007) p.4.

³ See, for example, Scott Hames (ed). *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (Word Power Books, 2012).

⁴ See Carla Sassi, 'Introduction' in *Anglistik* 23.2 (2012) pp.7-16. Special Issue 'Focus on Scottish Studies: a New Agenda for the Field'.

⁵ Jan Baetens, 'Cultural Studies after the Cultural Studies Paradigm', in *Cultural Studies* 19.1 (2005) p.2.

⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁷ See, for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Toward a Globally Sensitive Patriotism', in *Daedalus* 137.3 (2008): pp.78-93.

⁸ See, for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, *Ibid.*, or Dennis Thompson, 'Democratic Theory and Global Society' in *Journal of Political Philosophy* 7.2 (1999): pp.111-125.

⁹ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Towards a Transnational Turn in Narrative Theory: Literary Narratives, Travelling Tropes, and the Case of Virginia Woolf and the Tagores' in *Narrative* 19.1 (2011): p.5.

¹⁰ The first, in 2006, was coordinated by Giovanna Covi (University of Trento), while in 2008 I was awarded a Royal Society Visiting Research Fellowship in 2008 to further my research at the University of Stirling.

¹¹ Carla Sassi, 'Acts of (Un)willed Amnesia: Dis/appearing Figurations of the Caribbean in Post-Union Scottish Literature' in J. Anim-Addo, G. Covi, V. Pollard, C. Sassi eds. *Caribbean-Scottish Relations Colonial and Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language and Literature* (London: Mango Publishing, 2007 p.135.

¹² See Carla Sassi, 'Introduction' in *Anglistik* 23.2 (2012). op. cit.

¹³ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Towards a Transnational Turn in Narrative Theory', p. 7. op.cit.

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referendum debate among Scotland's leading writers and artists.³ It has also witnessed a meaningful transition towards a more complex theoretical articulation of Scottish studies as a field of academic investigation, both through the involvement of a growing number of scholars (within and outwith Britain) and in terms of a wider international disciplinary recognition. Within Scotland, it has also fostered an unprecedentedly wide debate on the institutionalisation of the study of Scottish literature, leading to the recent introduction of a compulsory question on Scottish literature in the Higher English exam.

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(c) The Bottle Imp