

Celtic Postmodernism — Scotland and the Break Up of Britain

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Calls for Scotland to leave the political union with England have led to the referendum on independence which will take place on September 18.

Some argue that Scotland would prosper better as an independent country, while others say doing so would be hugely damaging and that the two countries are better off together.

The Telegraph, 11 September, 2014.

“Remarkable fecundity of mind”— the swordsman and his familiar

On its 77th page, *The Bridge* (1986), up to that point developing as a serious “ontological” novel about being and identity, breaks into a completely unsignalled sword and sorcery fantasy. The sudden shift is marked by a move into dialect, or, rather, a twisted version of Scots that parodies the dialect novel. Far from aiming at any authenticity, this comic narrative draws exaggerated attention to itself as the curious and slippery.

A first-person narrative tells the story of an earthy swordsman, or “barbarian,” and the “familiar” given to him by a “majishin” who “sed it woold tel me things.” After revealing where the “majishin” keeps his gold, however, the good service of this creature ends — “fukin thing’s nevir sed enythin usefyull since, just blethers oll day long.” It remains part of the swordsman’s organic life, a parasite demanding to be fed

and watered. Sitting on the warrior's shoulder with its claws buried deep into his flesh, it induces no pain — as long as no attempt is made at removal. Try to detach it, however, and the host suffers the agonies of the damned.¹ The familiar is strongly ethnicized and acculturated. He's an English bore who thinks himself an authority on just about everything under the sun. Over the years the swordsman has learned that there's no getting rid of the thing. Now he just leaves "it thare ... an we get on as well as can be expected. Wish it didnae shite doon ma bak thow."²

The scene moves to the cut and thrust of immediate battle, where the swordsman is assaulting a "fukin big towur" with the piratical aim of relieving a queen of her wealth. The English "familiar" resides as usual on the Scot's shoulder, urging him on but also insulting as the warrior battles through the castle's defenses, his "sord cuverd in blud":

You still lost? I thought so. Worried about the smoke? Of course. A smarter chap would solve both problems at once by watching the way the smoke's drifting; it will try to rise, and there aren't many windows on this floor. Not that there's much chance of *you* making that sort of connection I imagine; your wits are about as fast as a sloth on Valium. Pity your stream of consciousness hasn't entered the inter-glacial age yet, but we can't all be mental giants.

Unsurprisingly, this kind of response infuriates: "Wun day this fukin things goantae drive me right up the bleadin waw, so it wull, oil this mindless chatur in ma erehoal."

As this extract shows, although the broad time frame appears to be archaic the familiar is both characteristically modern in a classical kind of way and precociously contemporary. Not only does he know how to anthropologize myth and psychologize, he also has access to the world of benzodiazepines and the shopping mall. From the swordsman's perspective, of another age altogether, it is the parasite that is

indecipherable. They are, despite the obvious differences, doubles or counterparts of miscommunication, the familiar being almost “family” in some respects.³

The pair eventually arrives at a throne room. The queen is nowhere to be seen. The bemused swordsman sits down on her throne, which magically rises up to a room where “chopt up” women still alive are smiling and strapped to chairs. They are without arms or legs, as if these had been lost in battle, or surgically removed — “some cunt had dun a right neet job on them.” Finally, after slaughtering the queen’s priests, the swordsman and his familiar discover the queen, another magician, who immediately renders the swordsman paralyzed. Powerless, he is forced to watch on while “these two basturds ... [jabber] away like I wisnay heer! Bludy cheek, eh!” It is clear that the queen and the familiar know each other of old. The swordsman might reasonably think of himself in terms of agency but the real conflict has been going on elsewhere all the time. Suddenly the queen “cums jumping oot the chare riyht at me like a fukin big bat or sumhin ... Just aboot shit ma breeks so I did.” But her target is not the swordsman at all. The familiar is the real adversary and he must now relinquish his power over the swordsman to engage fully with the queen. He flies into her face and grips on, rather like the creature in the Ridley Scott film *Alien*, released a few years before this novel. “Coodnae bileev me gude luck. Got the wee basturd aff ma showder at last; fuk this fur a gaim aw sodjers, am aff.” The swordsman retreats. He never does find the gold. Deciding to cut his losses, he rapes the dismembered “wimin instead” and exits. He has not, he says, been so lucky since the “wee familiar” went, “an I miss the wee bam sumtines, but nivir mind. Still majic just been a sordsman.”⁴

This piece of writing both does and does not belong to “Scotland.” It appears to join up in various ways with genres familiar to Scottish literary tradition — fantasy,

the historical novel, and the dialect novel.⁵ An allegory of the Union and Anglo-Scottish national identities, it operates in a contemporary political world, registering loudly in postcolonial terms and invoking the famous doubleness of “Caledonian antiszygy” constructed by countless commentators as a fundamental of Scottish culture. But all these elements are at the service of a comically macho intervention. There is no *real* fantasy or dialect novel here and no essential duality either, blighting the implied maker of this narrative with the classic Scottish “predicament” of cultural schizophrenia. All are materials at someone’s disposal, used in ironic, masterful ways and all are subject to the layers of narrative that surround and envelop this tale of the swordsman and his “familyar.”

For this story begins somewhere quite other, with a car crash. The “real” central figure of the narratology, we think, is the victim now removed (in his mind?) to a strange land which seems solely comprised of a huge bridge where people live and work without any real understanding of worlds beyond the bridge. He has lost all memory and is being treated by a psychiatrist who requires him to recount his dreams. The allegory just recalled is, “in fact,” a dream just had, one which sickens the narrator with its gore and sexual violence. Perhaps it is self-loathing that on this occasion leads Mr Orr (or what?) to the decision not to reveal his true dream to his analyst and invent instead a sequence of three dreams from nowhere. The psychiatrist’s responses, however, seem to indicate that he is somehow hearing the true dream recalled, although Dr Joyce denies ever voicing the articulations that Orr claims to hear. That other name, by the way, recalls the high priest of modernist literary iconoclasm, interior monologue and the “Circe” episode of *Ulysses*, the art of which is termed “hallucination.” But so what? None of that helps much with the obvious question. Who is fooling who here?

Orr returns to his apartment where a screen persistently plays what appears to be the drama of a man in a coma being treated in hospital — there are strong echoes of the cult television series *The Prisoner* in all this, especially of episode three, originally broadcast in the UK on October 1967 where in a paranoid scenario typical of the series and the sixties more generally, Number 2 tries to manipulate Number 6's dreams and the result mysteriously appears as film. For some reason he can't quite pin down, Orr is bothered by the hospital show. He calls the engineers, believing his screen to be broken. He has taken a bath before his appointment with Dr Joyce. The steam has condensed on the bathroom mirror obscuring his image. He feels "rubbed out" or, as the other Joyce's consubstantial son puts it in relation to the artist and his work, he is "refined out of existence."⁶

This was one version of the Scottish postmodern novel as it appeared in 1986 — a rich, inventive, genre-breaking, "metafiction." It looked back to earlier traditions, but was hardly of those traditions in any straightforward way. Although various mapping exercises have traced links between Scottish fiction of the 1980s and 90s and pretty well all phases of Scottish culture from the reformation onwards, there can be no doubt that this great outburst of writing from such figures as Banks, Janice Galloway, Andrew Crumey, Alice Thompson, Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Alan Warner, Irvine Welsh and many others was something new. If, as some maintain, it was indebted to 1960s Scottish counter culture via such figures as Alexander Trocchi, Muriel Spark and R. D. Laing, it owed a further and more substantial debt to a precise set of immediate historical circumstances outlined below.⁷

Poets, playwrights, critics and other artists were also constitutive of this cultural movement — Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, Tom McGrath, Douglas Oliver, John Davidson, Ian Hamilton Finley and Edwin Morgan. Frank Kuppner's early

collections of poems, *A Bad Day for the Sung Dynasty* (1984) and *The Intelligent Observation of Naked Women* (1987) and the prose/poem volume *Ridiculous! Absurd! Disgusting!* (1989) ran the full catalogue of postmodern aesthetics from parody and pastiche through to intrusive author, vanishing subject, narrative dead-end and philosophical absurdity; his work constituted the most radical version of deconstruction to be found in any cultural product belonging to this place and time.⁸ But the period and its character became especially focused around novels, some of them, like Gray's *Lanark* (1981), constructed on a grand scale.

This, Gray's first full-length publication made no claim to be the originary, groundbreaking text of Scotland's "second renaissance," far from it — a fourteen page "index" near the end of the book owned up to one hundred and eight cases of plagiarism, organizing the theft into three kinds — "block," "imbedded" and "diffuse."⁹ But as a four-part gospel combining classic *bildungsroman* with dystopic future fantasy, *Lanark* had acculturated and nationalized, if not racialized — not least through its sheer size and scope. It became immediately central to the idea of a revival in national literature. Described by Alan Massie as "a quite extraordinary achievement, the most remarkable thing done in Scottish fiction for a very long time," Gray's first novel drew immediate comparisons with *Ulysses*, that other "Celtic" high-status masterpiece.¹⁰ Indeed, for some, Gray's monumental book marked a shift in the locus of the experimental novel from one Celtic margin to another. Introducing *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* some twenty years later, Colm Toibín, invited his readers to "compare the calmness of contemporary Irish writing with the wildness of contemporary Scottish writing." Drawing, ironically enough, on nineteenth-century English stereotypes of the fierce yet magical Celt, he imagined "a legacy of Sterne and Swift, Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien [that] had taken the Larne-Stranraer

ferry.” In new Scottish novels, Toibín was finding “political anger, stylistic experiment and formal trickery.”¹¹

Gray’s great anti-Thatcher novel *1982, Janine* appeared in 1984. Eight years later a new generation writer, Banks, published *The Crow Road*, underrated by the literary establishment but one of the great novels of the period. This was followed shortly after by Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (1993) — even more difficult to assimilate into a conservatively constructed Scottish canon but indisputably a game-changing text of brilliance and great energy that was self-consciously postmodern in its aesthetic. A year later Secker and Warburg published Kelman’s *How Late It Was How Late*, which became the controversial winner of the Booker prize. Many distinguished but less celebrated novels besides featured across the period, including Emma Tennant’s *The Bad Sister* (1978), Galloway’s *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989) and Alan Warner’s *Morvern Callar* (1995), with Banks and Welsh in particular achieving great commercial success. A string of genre-busting novels in detective fiction and science fiction from such figures as Ian Rankin and Ken Macleod contributed to the sense of new localized centers of fiction writing, notably Glasgow and Edinburgh based, with a developing publishing and critical culture to match — although prominent figures in this movement, Tennant, Banks and Welsh for instance, were publishing mostly outside Scotland.

There were elements of postmodern culture and criticism appearing simultaneously in Northern Ireland and Wales, but nothing like this concentration of high-quality experimental prose fiction appeared anywhere else in Britain, except arguably across a range of new writing from England that could never have identified itself as “English.” The Irish Republic was becoming exemplary in terms of postmodern economics and critical culture, but its revolution in radical postcolonial

fiction had come confusingly early in the twentieth century and somehow seemed to belong to distinct traditions. For the 1980s, the Thatcher decade, there can be no doubt that Scotland was the definitive home of a new writing cheaply sloganeered in this chapter as “Celtic postmodernism.”

“You’re no trying to tell us Pontius fucking Pilot was born in Scotland!”—

historiographics, neo-nationalism and the postmodern moment

As many commentators have pointed out, Scottish writing of this period was a cultural formation specific to time and place. It wrote back to its literary pasts but, like Yeats’ formation of Celtic revivalism at the turn of the previous century, was much defined by the political present, the local manifestation of conditions playing out across the world and being analyzed by figures like Jameson and Terry Eagleton in terms of a crisis in “late capitalism”. From this perspective, modern Scotland, often constructed from both inside and outsiderly positions as a cultural backwater, was reformulated as a microcosm now resonating in global terms.

The second Scottish renaissance, thought by many to pack “as much cultural punch as the First Renaissance of the 1920s,” came out of a complex politics and economics not least focused through the development of the North Sea oil fields in the 1960s and 70s.¹² Seen by nationalists as a vast Scottish economic resource flowing back to England and Westminster, that scandalous combination of international business and empire politics was of a piece with the chicanery behind the 1979 referendum on independence.¹³ Post-industrial decline, a collapse in social and political structures as well as economic forms, taking place simultaneously across Europe and the United States, powerfully circumscribed these events. The devastation of its effects in places like Clydeside was closely related to the failure of political

process under a long period of Tory government for which Scotland never voted. Margaret Thatcher, a new-wave personality politician drawn to the international stage, was particularly despised in Scotland, but the issues promoting renewed interest in Scottish nationalism went deeper than resistance to her version of radical conservatism.¹⁴ In the later 90s, the failure of Blair's long awaited Labour government to deliver on social contract constituted a political betrayal in some ways even more destructive of any optimism about Scotland in Britain.

Writing for the *New Left Review* in the mid 1970s, the Scottish radical Tom Nairn produced powerfully prescient analyses of what he saw as the inevitable "break-up of Britain." Published in book form in 1979, the first three of these accounts "The Twilight of the British State," "Scotland and Europe" and "Old and New Scottish Nationalism," were designed to render Britain's past incompatible with Scottish futures, a splitting essential to the development of a genuinely populist neo-nationalism in Scotland capable of seriously challenging the historical authority of the Union.

Highly suggestive of the climate in which Scottish writing developed in the 80s and a direct influence on the earliest generation of new Scottish writers, especially Gray, these accounts formulated a radical reconstruction of the nineteenth-century.¹⁵ Here Britain figured not as the prototype modern nation but as a particularly historicized failure, one condemned to archaism by the peculiarities of a political settlement geared towards the preservation of a corrupt and decaying English elite. Nairn went on to argue that Britain, forever tied to the past by virtue of a unique political conspiracy, never actually modernized at all. A long way in reality from the balanced, rational compromise of Whig myth, "the pioneer modern-liberal constitutional state" thus viewed was incapable of becoming contemporary. It retained

“the archaic stamp of its priority,” remaining “a basically indefensible and inadaptably relic, not a modern state form” at all. With that analysis, the idea of Britain representing a wider consensus “outside England (empire, federation of Scotland, Ireland, England, Wales)” became nothing more than a “delusion.”¹⁶

Neo-nationalism, especially in its Scottish formation, emerged as the only intervention that could displace a failed class politics. More than a viable alternative to the Scottish Labour Party, it took on the status of a historical imperative if Scotland was to avoid the awful fate of the British mess — “social sclerosis, an over-traditionalism leading to incurable backwardness.” Stability became a paralytic “*over-stability*” (my emphasis) operating across the political spectrum from Conservatism to the “so-called ‘social revolution’” of the Labour Party in the postwar years and leading only “to rapidly accelerating backwardness, economic stagnation, social decay, and cultural despair.”¹⁷

Nairn’s historical redirection did not produce Scotland’s second renaissance, of course, but it echoed across a Scottish new writing that was conducting its own versions of Britain’s break up more or less simultaneously. The doubleness of *Lanark*’s end-stopped and romanticized pasts (progressivist, humanist, individualist) and terrifying presentist futures (militarist, consumerist, materialist) strongly evoked Nairn’s analyses, as did the dark fantasies of *1982, Janine* where sexual violence took on “a convincing political structure” and vice versa — “Scotland has been fucked. I mean that word in the vulgar sense of *misused to give satisfaction or advantage to another*.” Throughout this novel, focused through a singular I-narrative, Nairn’s analysis is reproduced in demotic terms. Britain becomes a “Falstaffian” heritage culture dominated by an elite: “our colourful past has returned, we display as rich a pageant of contrasts as in the days of Lizzie Tudor, Merry Charlie Stewart and the

Queen Empress Victoria. Our royal millionaire weds in Westminster Abbey and departs in a luxury cruiser to the cheers of the nation while unemployed children loot shops and battle with the police in slums.” Democratic process is rendered meaningless — “it does not matter how the British worker votes at an election, because the leaders of the big parties only discuss small things which do not disturb their investments.” This “perfectly frank and open conspiracy,” already mapped out in Nairn’s “The Twilight of the British State,” transforms individual agency into pointless performance. For all his espousal of right-wing ideas, the central figure through whom this novel is articulated, “Jock” McLeish, cannot be a true Conservative any more than he can be called “true” in any sense. Like Edinburgh itself, “a setting for an opera nobody performs nowadays ... an opera called Scottish history”, “Jock” is a fabrication, entirely contingent on his imagined imperial Other — indeed impossible to formulate outside of this mirror image and entirely at the State’s disposal.¹⁸

Gray’s more carnivalesque *Poor Things* (1993), was shaped in even more fundamental ways by Nairn’s essays. The central narrative dynamic of this novel is precisely a break up of Britain, re-imagined in terms of Bella Caledonia’s dramatic escape from her brutal husband — the vile Anglo-Saxon aristocrat par excellence, General Sir Aubrey de la Pole Blessington Bart VC. Digging deep into a nineteenth-century past, the novel is reworked through the pretense that the text itself is a concoction of lost memoirs, diaries and other historical detritus. The idea of a hidden history forms the basis of an interrogation of claim and counterclaim, both engaged in the novel’s wider structure where the fantasy narrative of the lost book is countered by a wife’s letter to posterity and both are made subject to Gray’s “notes historical and critical.” Such historiographic techniques, like Nairn’s dialectic, open up the past

to a radical reinscription, as does the central conceit of *Poor Things* where the world is perceived through the brain of an unborn child transposed into the body of her dead mother — Gray's revisionist version of Edinburgh Gothic.

Bank's *The Crow Road* was similarly formulated around the historiographic. Its central figure and narrator, Prentice, is brought up in a landscape where Celtic myth and history are everywhere evoked and often conflated. Thus Prentice as a child is confused by his father's story of "the mythosaur and the cairns" which he thinks must be "history." Gripped by a family past slowly turning into detective mystery, the older Prentice, now a failing undergraduate historian, embarks on an attempt to reconstruct events which seem highly evocative of a blighted nation in a postmodern world. Idealizing a science of history which can get to the truth, Prentice is attracted to "just being a historian," while at the same time strongly gripped by the problematics of historiography. Suspicious of his own motives, he questions whether he is making "something out of nothing, treating our recent, local history, like some past age and looking too assiduously, too imaginatively for links and patterns and connections, and so turning myself into some sort of small-scale conspiracy theorist."¹⁹

Nairn's account conducted itself in terms of neo-Marxist discourses, but its radical interference with progressivist historiographies would have been quite impossible without the space-clearing generated by the broader deconstructive intellectual culture with which it was contemporary. This partly explains why these essays resonated so widely. *The Break Up of Britain* (1979) was part of the same cultural climate that produced novels like Emma Tennant's *The Bad Sister* (1979) and Sian Hayton's *The Cell of Knowledge* (1989), both second-wave feminist appropriations of Celticism with the latter particularly devoted to interrogation of the

authority of master narrative. The former, like Banks' tale of the swordsman and his "family," turns on a central doubling unearthed in "an ancient story of bitterness and revenge."²⁰ At formal levels the Thaw sections of *Lanark* and the early novels of James Kelman — *The Bus Conductor Hines* (1984) and *A Chancer* (1985) — often read in terms of "social realism," were in fact just as deconstructive of the centre. They produced powerful "images of a working-class for whom the future, as traditionally envisaged by progressivist politics, has been abolished," one reason why Kelman's work has remained so much fixed in a 1980s world.²¹ Even science fiction, a genre traditionally "beyond nation," found ways of including "speculative nationality" in its "thought experiments."²² John Garrison has argued that the Culture's encounter with the Azad Empire in Iain M. Banks' 1988 novel *The Player of Games*, for example, "offers a fruitful analysis for examining the current stance of Scotland in relationship not only to Britain but also within the broader geopolitical imaginary continually redefined by globalization, multiculturalism and transnationalism."²³

Some Scottish novelists, uneasy if not actually riled by what was perceived as the trendy intellectualism of postmodernism, attempted to separate themselves out in public pronouncement. Gray distinguished himself from the multiform pluralism of a tricky cultural fad to declare himself a straightforward propagandist "for democratic welfare-state Socialism and an independent Scottish parliament." At the same time, he insisted that his fictions were geared towards seducing "the reader by disguising themselves as sensational entertainment", a sentiment immediately undercut by the further half-joke that his "jacket designs and illustrations — especially the erotic ones — ...[were] designed with the same high purpose."²⁴ All of which indicated how far Scottish new writing and its makers remained firmly implicated in postmodern

identities and aesthetics. These novels, in whatever sense nationalist, registered in postmodern terms, not least as “historiographic metafiction.” They represented a sophisticated return to place and localism that exploited and opposed both cheap *kitsch*, the “multiple caricatures haunting Scots society,” and the centralizing authority of master narrative.²⁵ Here, especially in the writing of figures like Kelman and Welsh, “the local and the regional,” for all the difficulties, were “stressed in the face of a mass culture and a kind of vast global informational village that McLuhan could only have dreamed of.” This complex concoction put into play a particular form of the decentred perspective, the Scottish version of the marginal — what Linda Hutcheon, also writing in the 1980s, termed the “ex-centric” — but it did so in an intellectual culture where purist versions of national identity were routinely declared to be “entities” that have little or no meaning.²⁶ Thus at the height of his activities as a public intellectual, Kelman talked about the urgent need for clarity. In talking about “indigenous culture” he was, he wrote, not referring to “some kind of ‘pure native-born Scottish person’ or some mystical ‘national culture’.” Neither, he continued, has “ever existed in the past and cannot conceivably exist in the future.”²⁷

“Thirdly, when discussing the extinction of all human life, the most important thing to do is not to exaggerate” — an inconclusive note on the subject of Frank Kuppner

For some commentators — Cairns Craig would be the classic example — the sketching out of a generic context for Scottish new writing of this period points to an encompassing cultural frame. Here “serious” contemporary Scottish writing becomes subsumed under a general postcolonial dynamic where a culture attempts to deliver itself from the thrall of an imagined and highly singularized English hegemony.

In reality, postmodern Scottish writing and the cultures surrounding it was distinct but multiple in all kinds of ways. It was often opportunistic and much more contracted to cultural contexts beyond both Scotland and Britain than some writers had been prepared to admit. It was also characterized more by fractious contestation than communal solidarity. Kelman's assaults on the cultural orthodoxies promoting Glasgow as a European city of culture in the 1990s were symptomatic of an environment where virtually all aspects of decolonization, including the very idea of Scotland as colony, had been both exploited and strongly disputed.²⁸ Some objected to the commercializing of Scottish identities and the "nation novel" in a market where "ethnic" literature had been much promoted by transnational publishers. Writing in 1983 Joyce McMillan, theater critic for *The Scotsman*, wrote about how, in her view, the urge to preserve Scottishness went "far beyond what comes naturally and truthfully to writers."²⁹

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the imperative towards reconfiguring the dimensions of national identity produced its own form of counter culture, especially at the popular level. Thus in a novel like *Trainspotting* the English are "wankers," but the Scots far worse because "we are colonised by wankers."³⁰ At the more self-consciously cerebral end of things, a figure like Frank Kuppner becomes the true iconoclast of Scottish writing in this period, an apologetic anti-humanist who cannot in truth describe himself as "a British writer," but does recall with some nostalgic fondness a time of his life when, "for quite a few years," he was on unemployment benefit and experienced some positive feeling for the old order. "Every time I went into the Post Office to cash the giro I would feel a sort of distant warmth toward the British state."³¹

This survey concludes with Kuppner for a number of reasons, not all of them connected with discursive necessity — which is probably just as well given Kuppner’s upturning of such notions. One of the less-celebrated figures in Scotland’s “second renaissance,” Kuppner has received some critical recognition but relatively few proselytizers. He deserves more. One suspects that the critic Richard Crawford is not wrong to feel that the difficulty with Kuppner, quite outside of the genuine demands of his work, is that that he somehow seems the most “un-Scottish” of the figures writing at this time.³² The problem is not that he is “half Polish” — Scottish neo-nationalism has already and consistently articulated its distance from any form of race-based politics — but, rather, that his “models,” the intertextualities that have inspired so many of his works, have been so emphatically outward looking. In what appears to be an overdone determination to look beyond Scotland, Kuppner, like Trocchi before him, has been strongly influenced by the French avant garde — Robbe-Grillet and especially the nineteenth-century forerunner of surrealism, Lautréamont — as well as by the New York School and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing.³³ Where intertextuality has deeply shaped his work, and it often has, the models range across “other cultures” and, on occasion, their mediation by “the West.” His first collection of poetry, *A Bad Day for the Sung Dynasty*, plays with Western scholarship in relation to Chinese traditions of poetry worked through 501 quatrains; in the second collection, *The Intelligent Observation of Naked Women*, one long poem interferes with a 1930s guide-book to Prague; another, “Five Quartets” rewrites Eliot; a third “Fifty-One Border Ballads” is closer to home but operates precisely at territorial margins. Likewise “In a Persian Garden,” published in the 1994 collection *Everything is Strange*, constructs itself as a radically altered version of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Kayyam*, itself powerfully mediated through what the back cover note describes

as the “paraphrase” of the English author and poet with the French-sounding name, Richard La Gallienne. Here deliverance from the stereotypes of the kailyard is rendered not by the kind of historiographic intervention described above but by the comic and highly transgressive appropriation of something like “world culture” on a massive scale.

Where Kuppner does invoke the “local”, he does so, again, in sharply transgressive ways that tend to have the effect of undermining the very idea of national culture and the strategies which try to render such concepts in intelligible terms. In the remarkable 1990 work *A Concussed History of Scotland*, “a novel of another sort” or “another sort of novel,” eminent figures of Scottish culture are contaminated, not least with a vulgar and highly gendered eroticism that appears to operate at the end of philosophy.³⁴ Robert Louis Stevenson is remembered for his “dictum that every woman has been fitted with at least one aperture which properly belongs to quite another female, but I cannot believe that that, even if it were true, would be true. But that is a very dangerous remark to make, I’m sure you’ll agree, for one should not be flippant about the truth.” Carlyle figures via a narrative commitment to the truth of his “aperçue that to be fully human is to be obsessed by little tits;” the “narrator” of this writing distances himself, however, from the view of J. C. Maxwell, the Scottish physicist, “that every woman at heart is a 13-amp fuse,” and so on.³⁵

For some there remains something usefully local about this comic name checking; some have seen in the techniques of *A Concussed History* an identification with Carlyle’s extraordinary reproduction of German idealism in *Sartor Resartus*.³⁶ That, it is said, instates a Scottish connection of some significance. At the same time this text and its precursor *Ridiculous! Absurd! Disgusting!* are masterpieces of classic

deconstruction. They have neither character nor plot, or, rather, they construct themselves as exercises in the thwarting of all plot and all identity. Here the narrator of *A Concussed History* can claim to be at various times a man, a woman, a dog, a plant and a skirt. As the above suggests, the even more destructive mode in which these texts operate has as much to do with “metaphysical ruminations” as literary aesthetics, the former wickedly comprised of internal discrepancies, contradictions, hopeless over qualification as well as being wrecked by the persistent interpolations of mundane, ordinary life.³⁷ How do such texts really operate in terms of national culture and how do they articulate against any meaningful form of national politics? Kuppner himself warns that the whole enterprise is a “crystallization of authority which inheres in writing in general.” At the same time, and crucially, it carries with it a “watermark saying ‘Beware of such Authorities’.”³⁸ Nothing here, it seems, can be taken at face value, especially any evaluation arrived at by self-reflection — a radical position that in no way excludes the “political,” far from it.

Truly, on the day when entirely by my own efforts I liberated the whole country from tyranny and established a type of society and a mode of government which enlightened unprejudiced judges everywhere hail as one of the greatest successes of our time — I could go further now but modesty precludes such a course of action — I must be honest with you.³⁹

Notes

¹ Iain Banks, *The Bridge* (1986; London: Abacus, 1994), 77.

² Banks, *The Bridge*, 78.

³ *The Bridge*, 79.

⁴ *The Bridge*, 79-84.

⁵ For a distinguished conservative account of tradition and the Scottish novel see Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 1999. For a dissenting version, see Eleanor Bell, *Questioning Scotland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004).

⁶ Banks, *The Bridge*, 7; James Joyce, *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1916; London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), 245.

⁷ On the second Scottish renaissance as counterculture and “resistance as mutual experience” see Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Cultural Theory Since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). Spark was an early champion of Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau-roman*. See Gardiner, 46.

⁸ Kuppner’s work is less well-known than some, perhaps most, of his contemporaries but central to an understanding of Scottish postmodern writing in this period. See Robert Crawford, *Identifying Poets — Self and Territory in Twentieth Century Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993); Roel Daamen, “A Confluence of Narratives: Cultural Perspectives in Postmodernist Scottish Fiction” in Theo D’Haen and Peiter Vermueken (eds), *Cultural Identity and Postmodern Writing* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006), 119-45.

⁹ Alasdair Gary, *Lanark: A Life in 4 Books* (1981; London: Granada), 485-91.

¹⁰ *The Scotsman* (28 February, 1981). Anthony Burgess, for example, made the comparison in *Ninety-Nine Novels, The Best in English since 1939: A Personal Choice By Anthony Burgess*, (London: Allison and Busby, 1984).

¹¹ Colm Toibín, *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), xxxii.

¹² Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting*, 153.

¹³ See Cairns Craig, “1979” in Brian McHale and Randall Stevenson (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth Century Literature s in English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Thatcher had a particularly poor understanding of Scottish Unionism. See Richard Finlay, “Thatcherism, unionism and nationalism: a comparative study of Scotland and Wales” in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher’s Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2012), 165-79.

¹⁵ A number of writers have noted the influence of Nairn on Alistair Gray, especially on *1982*, *Janine* and *Poor Things*. See, for example, Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, 249 and Len Platt “‘How SCOTTISH I am’: Alasdair Gray, Race and Neo-Nationalism’ in Len Platt and Sara Upstone (eds), *Postmodern Literature and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). The account of Nairn’s *The Break-Up of Britain* in this chapter is adapted from this essay.

¹⁶ Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977; London: Verso, 1991), 22, 75, 78.

¹⁷ *The Break-Up of Britain*, 40, 43, 51.

¹⁸ Alasdair Gray, *1982*, *Janine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), 136, 151, 233.

¹⁹ Iain Banks, *The Crow Road* (1992; London: Abacus 1993), 32, 432, 402.

²⁰ Emma Tennant, *The Bad Sister* (1978) in *Travesties* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 54.

²¹ Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, 103.

²² See Istvan Cisery-Roney Jr, “Dis-Imagined Communities: Science Fiction and the Future of Nations” in Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon (eds), *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 217-237.

- ²³ John Garrison, "Speculative Nationality: 'Stands Scotland Where it Did?'" in the Culture Novels of Iain M. Banks" in McCracken-Flesher (ed.) *Scotland as Science Fiction* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012), 55-67 [57].
- ²⁴ Quoted in Susan Windisch Brown, *Contemporary Novelists*, 6th ed. (London: St James Press, 1966).
- ²⁵ Nairn, *The Break Up of Britain*, 170.
- ²⁶ Hutcheon *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History*, 12.
- ²⁷ James Kelman, "Oppression and Solidarity" in *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political* (Stirling: AK Press, 1994), 72.
- ²⁸ The Scottish academy is now impatient with that debate. See Michael Gardiner, Graeme McDonald and Niall O'Gallagher (eds), *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011). Gardiner's introduction to this collection seeks to "leave behind" the question of whether Scotland "is postcolonial" (1).
- ²⁹ See Bell, *Questioning Scotland*, 43; Joyce McMillan, "The Predicament of the Scottish Writer," *Chapman*, 35/6, 1983, 68-71 [70].
- ³⁰ Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1993), 78.
- ³¹ Attila Dósa, "'Conversation with Frank Kuppner'", *Scottish Studies Review*, Spring 2005, 84-100 [96].
- ³² Crawford, *Identifying Poets*, 121.
- ³³ See *Identifying Poets*, 122.
- ³⁴ The reversed terms appears on the front and back cover respectively of *A Concussed History*.
- ³⁵ Frank Kuppner, *A Concussed History of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), 106. 119, 126.

³⁶ See Crawford, *Identifying Poets*, 121. Daamen refers to the Carlyle connection in “A Confluence of Narratives,” 138-9.

³⁷ Daamen, “A Confluence of Narratives,” 135

³⁸ Dósa, “Conversation with Frank Kuppner,” 87.

³⁹ Kuppner, *A Concussed History of Scotland*, 130.