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On Vernacular Scottishness and its Limits: Devolution and the Spectacle of "Voice"

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In a set-piece irresistible to cultural critics, the state opening of the new Scottish Parliament found its "truly electric moment, the moment everyone remembers" when the new intake of MSPs joined in Sheena Wellington's performance of "A Man's a Man for a' that."[1] "Part of the frisson," observed Douglas Mack, "doubtless derived from the fact that this old song gives voice to a radical egalitarianism of a kind not usually associated with royal opening ceremonies" (p. 148). With their noisy contempt for elite prerogative, Burns' verses are difficult to square with the sanctifying presence of the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh and the Duke of Rothesay, who "sat in respectful silence, listening to lines about rank being merely 'the guinea's stamp,' about 'yon birkie ca'd a lord,' about the 'tinsel show' of wealth and privilege."[2] This awkwardness extends to the well-scrubbed parliamentarians, solemnly crooning vindication of their "toils obscure" and ventriloquizing the disdain of the powerless.

But as nobody in the chamber (or watching a recording) could mistake, in the moment of song these rhetorical glitches are as nothing – so much "a' that" to be triumphantly set aside. The contradictions of the scene are flushed away in the sensuous mutuality of collective singing. In releasing the sound and experience of latent togetherness – the force of

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[1] Douglas Mack, "Can the Scottish Subaltern Speak? Nonelite Scotland and the Scottish Parliament," in Caroline McCracken-Flesher, ed., *Culture, Nation, and the New Scottish Parliament* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2007), 141-57 (p. 148). Wellington's performance in the "Opening Ceremony" video is at www.scottish.parliament.uk/newsandmediacentre/30903.aspx (at 39.30 min.).

[2] Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2002), 1.

"unisonance" described by Benedict Anderson[3] – this song-pageant manifests a condition of national co-presence emblematised by *voice*; and on terms far exceeding those of the Scotland Act 1998.

Voice and its giving and joining have been key motifs in Scottish literary and political discourse of the past few decades. This article explores the ambivalence of voice as a trope for national expression and empowerment, and considers the complex appeal of "vernacular" rhetoric during the period, and within the limits, of Scottish devolution. In critical discourse which elides literary and democratic claims to voice during this period, Scottish vernacular writing functions both as a soulful emblem of suppressed agency, and a flexible "display identity" within a spectacle of cultural difference. Conceiving devolution as a granting-of-voice on these terms, I argue, tends to re-inscribe the containment logic of 1970s UK centralism, releasing/locking Scottish cultural production into reified postures of "representation" which leave uncontested the *constitution* of representative power.

With its intense particularism trumping – and co-opting – residues of demotic communion, vernacular writing exceeds the democratic claim for recognition and participation, over-spilling the civic sphere and its representative forms. In Scottish writing of the devolutionary period, there are two main paths for this over-spill: "depth" and lyric embodiment of the romantic subject (e.g. Kelman's *How late it was, how late*), or the kinetic "rush" of vocal spectacle (the exoticised lingos of Welsh's *Trainspotting*). Examining these separate flows reveals something about the limits of the democratic container itself and the inadequacy of conflating "voice" with second-order political cipherment. Yet shallow commodification of voice proves difficult to separate from appeals to its plenitude as an object of national attachment. The civic-democratic metonym of "vocal" empowerment cannot reconcile or govern the vernacular's restless shuttling between romantic and postmodern registers of authenticity, its simultaneous claims to cultural rootedness and semiotic autonomy. The rhetorical tensions and stylistic freedoms engendered by vernacular instability are richly apparent in recent Scottish writing. But what of its political significance in a period of constitutional change?

Grant Farred observes that the vernacular, "though it emerges from below is considerably more than a language of subalternity. It is not a

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[3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 145.

language in itself, but a form [of] public discourse."[4] This attempt to trace the literary and political contours of vernacular discourse in the period of Scottish devolution concludes with a provisional sketch of patterns visible in democratic, romantic and identitarian claims to "voice," and some reflections on how literary criticism might begin to move beyond "representative" paradigms to engage with voice as a principle of agency and actionality.

Display Identity

Why should vernacular cultural expression prove so central to the question of Scottish national autonomy? Reviewing Lindsay Paterson's argument that post-Union Scotland enjoyed substantial "domestic sovereignty," Tom Nairn insists that purely institutional identity is largely illegible in the nation-shaped order. As an answer to the modern question "who (i.e. what) are you?," cannily distinctive bureaucratic arrangements simply will not do. "In the mainstream of modern nationalism," Nairn writes,

> institutionally forged identity has almost by definition been unimportant: national movements normally have to demand "their own" civil institutions on the basis of their identity signposts. Hence politics is an ethnic-cultural, sometimes a religious, mobilisation foregrounding such signs.[5]

A body of signs held to embody national difference and tradition is perfectly suited to the task. In the post-romantic "world of diversity" bequeathed by Herder, Elie Kedourie writes, "language is the external and visible badge of those differences which distinguish one nation from

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[4] Grant Farred quoted by Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 12. I have resisted defining vernacular in precise terms (linguistic, political or otherwise); partly because the term scarcely admits of official codification, and partly to remain open to cognate terms and associations. Germane here is Jacques Rancière's distinction between proletarian and plebeian; the latter, he writes, "denotes a symbolic relationship and not a kind of labour. The plebeian is the individual excluded from the speech that makes history" (*Staging the People: The Proletarian and His Double*, trans. David Fernbach [London: Verso, 2011], 37). This is very close to the vernacular condition and discourse at issue here; and symptomatically re-codes (and de-materialises) the *class* relation. This re-coding is central to my wider interest in "vernacular" cultural politics, though not the focus of the present article.

[5] Tom Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited* (London: Verso, 1997), 191.

another; it is the most important criterion by which a nation is recognized to exist, and to have the right to form a state on its own."[6] However unfashionable these investments might now seem, they are baked into the most carefully post-romantic arguments for national self-determination. Arash Abizadeh insists "the nation has a *concreteness* that cannot be done away with," and a putatively earthy, emotive, hyper-physical language[7] is ideally positioned to realise the "affective mobilization" which remains necessary even to the most strenuously civic post-nationalism.[8] Indeed, appeals to the vernacular as the paradigm of authentically grounded interpersonal community have largely cast aside their ethnic-cultural accretions and been assimilated to the vocabulary of liberal multiculturalism. "Put simply," writes the political philosopher Will Kymlicka, "democratic politics is politics in the vernacular;" in modern societies "we can expect – as a general rule – that the more political debate is conducted in the vernacular, the more participatory it will be."[9] The common language of a people is an emblem not of its ethno-traditional rootedness but of its accessible civic space, apparently rinsed clean of exclusivist claims to belonging. This post-nationalist recuperation of Herderian rhetoric begins to explain why tropes of vernacular nationhood and authenticity are so prominent in the metaphorical currency of Scottish devolution and the independence debate.[10] This is an important context for grasping how the "new literary renaissance" of 1980s-90s Scottish writing, and its "radical" politics of vocal equality, resistance and liberation, became eligible for incorporation into mainstream constitutional discourse.

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[6] Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 58.

[7] See Gavin Miller, "'Persuade without convincing … represent without reasoning': the Inferiorist Mythology of the Scots Language," in Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller, eds., *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Scottish Literature and Culture* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2004), 197-209.

[8] Arash Abizadeh. "Liberal Nationalist versus Postnational Social Integration: On the Nation's Ethno-Cultural Particularity and 'Concreteness,'" *Nations and Nationalism*, 10.3 (2004): 231-250 (p. 240).

[9] Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 213-14.

[10] In announcing to parliament the date of the independence referendum, Alex Salmond described it as "the day when we take responsibility for our country, when we are able to speak in our own voice, choose our own direction and contribute in our own distinct way" (March 21, 2013; accessed April 5, 2013 at http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=7845).

"A parliament of novels"?

It is a commonplace of Scottish literary studies that "in the absence of elected political authority, the task of representing the nation has been repeatedly devolved to its writers."[11] Parliamentary metaphors pervade this discourse; the cover of a 1999 issue of *Edinburgh Review* declares "There's been a parliament of novels for years. This parliament of politicians is years behind."[12] Alex Thomson traces the first appearance of this meme to Cairns Craig's editorial foreword to the *Determinations* series published by Polygon beginning in 1989 ("the 1980s proved to be one of the most productive and creative decades in Scotland this century — as though the energy that had failed to be harnessed by the politicians flowed into other channels"). Thomson challenges readings of devolution as "the metaphorical sublimation of political energy into literary production,"[13] but in truth this process has worked in both directions, Holyrood drawing heavily on the romantic investments of "voice" in Scottish literary discourse. The imagery of Donald Dewar's 1999 speech of thanks to the Queen (immediately following Wellington's recital) anchors the representative functions of the new parliament well beyond its legal remit, at the much "deeper" and more concrete level evoked by the Burns song and by Grassic Gibbon's mystical "Speak of the Mearns" – within shouts and cries which do not signify but embody some essential trans-historic Scottishness:

> This is about more than our politics and our laws. This is about
> who we are, how we carry ourselves. In the quiet moments today,
> we might hear some echoes from the past:
>
>> The shout of the welder in the din of the great Clyde

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[11] Christopher Whyte, "Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 34.2 (1998): 274-85 (p. 284).

[12] *Edinburgh Review* 100 (1999); Duncan McLean quoted on back cover. See also Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2000), 307; Liam McIlvanney, "The Politics of Narrative in the Post-War Scottish Novel" in Zachary Leader, ed., *On Modern British Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 181-208 (p. 183); Cairns Craig, "Scotland: Culture After Devolution" in Edna Longley, Eamonn Hughes and Des O'Rawe, eds., *Ireland (Ulster) Scotland: Concepts, Contexts, Comparisons* (Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, 2003), 39-49 (p. 39).

[13] Alex Thomson, "'You can't get there from here': Devolution and Scottish literary history," *International Journal of Scottish Literature* 3 (2007). www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk

> shipyards;
> The speak of the Mearns, with its soul in the land;
> The discourse of the enlightenment, when Edinburgh and
>   Glasgow were a light held to the intellectual life of
>   Europe;
> The wild cry of the Great Pipes;
> And back to the distant cries of the battles of Bruce and
>   Wallace.
> The past is part of us. But today there is a new voice in the land,
> the voice of a democratic Parliament. A voice to shape Scotland,
> a voice for the future.[14]

The ritual en-soulment of Scotland's new democratic machinery appeals continually to "voice" as a principle of recuperated national substance and presence. Tropes of vocal plenitude help to mask the constitutive separation of action from authority in all democratic assemblies, the apparent "immediacy" of vernacular speech countering Holyrood's particularly complex attenuation of sovereignty.

In Alex Salmond's speech marking his re-election as First Minister following the 2011 SNP landslide, the rhetoric of voice shifts from depth to diversity. Perhaps wary of its essentialist baggage, Salmond grafts a "flexible" and non-exclusive dimension onto the vocal imaginary constructed by Dewar:

> When Donald Dewar addressed this parliament in 1999, he evoked Scotland's diverse voices: The speak of the Mearns. The shout of the welder above the din of the Clyde shipyard. The battle cries of Bruce and Wallace. Now these voices of the past are joined in this chamber by the sound of 21st century Scotland. The lyrical Italian of Marco Biagi. The formal Urdu of Humza Yousaf. The sacred Arabic of Hanzala Malik. We are proud to have those languages spoken here alongside English, Gaelic, Scots and Doric.[15]

The effort to add a multicultural alloy to more traditionally Scottish voice-totems goes so far as to recruit Hugh MacDiarmid as a champion of liberal-pluralist diversity: "Scotland's strength has always lain in its diversity. In the poem 'Scotland Small,' Hugh MacDiarmid challenged

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[14] Donald Dewar's speech at the opening of the Scottish Parliament 1 July 1999, www.scottish.parliament.uk/EducationandCommunityPartnershipsresources/New _Parliament_Levels_A-F.pdf, accessed September 21 2012.
[15] "Parliament re-elects First Minister" [Alex Salmond's acceptance speech], May 18 2011; www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2011/05/18104940, accessed September 25 2012.

those who would diminish us with stereotypes." Setting aside the pitfalls of "diversity" as a political ethic,[16] this laudably-inclusive vocal imaginary still operates on the logic of *displaying* pre-given "identities," vocal postures of essentialised difference. Many readings of recent Scottish literature interpret voice as a representative token on these limiting terms.[17]

Salmond valorises the plurality of Scottish voices precisely to rebut any suggestion of an exclusive or ethnic nationalism, but it is language which is the more powerfully binding force. Étienne Balibar notes that the notion of "language community" seems more abstract than "race,"

> but in reality it is the more concrete since it connects individuals up with an origin which may at any moment be actualized and which has as its content the *common act* of their own exchanges.[18]

Precisely this dynamic aspect, mediating between tradition and creation, collectivity and the individual utterance, allows nation-language "to appear as the very element of the life of a people, the *reality* which each person may appropriate in his or her own way, without thereby destroying its identity."[19]

This personal authentifying dimension – the anchoring and realisation of self in linguistic freedoms secured by the speech-community – is, I think, crucial in grasping the appeal of recent vernacular Scottishness. The primary claim of this identity is not a traditionary heritage and idiom of belonging, but a marginal, subjected condition conceived as *beyond* any re-centring or "inclusion" within a hegemonic cultural order (such as a state, or a standardised language). It licenses a radical particularism and

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[16] See Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity* (New York: Holt, 2006) and, especially, *The Shape of the Signifier* (Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), on how "the valorization of identity" emerges partly through fetishising linguistic difference and the materiality of the sign (p. 60). Gavin Miller has applied Michaels's insights in "Welsh and Identity Politics," in Berthold Schoene, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Irvine Welsh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2010), 89-99.
[17] See Scott Hames, "Don Paterson and Poetic Autonomy" in Berthold Schoene, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007), 245-55.
[18] Étienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology" in Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation Class: Ambiguous Identities*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1991), 86-106 (p. 97).
[19] Balibar, "The Nation Form," 98.

self-fashioning (for the individual, in the name of the group), while continuing to trade on (and exploit) the romantic "ethnic-cultural" residues of vernacular rootedness and community.

Supplying the concrete object of national attachment, the vernacular idiom of Scottishness combines an impression of *formal democracy* (a writing which formally registers and encodes Scottish difference, in ways pre-devolution political institutions did not), and an aura of *populist-demotic inclusiveness* (dialect as subaltern speech, satisfying the Thatcher-era contrastive identification of Scotland as egalitarian). Its class component re-coded as ethno-national subjection, the vernacular is a key means by which the "edgy" idiom of Scottishness, in the words of Aaron Kelly, "arrogates the living culture of the working class and then seeks to remarket it back to them as a commodity."[20]

Cool Statelessness and Self-Fashioning

In this respect the cool marginality of recent Scottish writing clearly resonates with what Graham Huggan calls *The Postcolonial Exotic*. The identitarian "representativeness" of Scottish vernacular writing is undoubtedly a function of "the mainstream demand for an 'authentic,' readily translatable, marginal voice," feeding and re-inscribing the contemporary fetishisation of cultural difference.[21] Whatever the validity of postcolonial readings of modern Scottish culture – beyond any doubt, the operative "difference" here is class – we should attend to the wider political context in which icons of subaltern nationality proved so attractive. Michael Keating summarizes the shifting complexion of "nations without a state" during the historical period in which UK devolution takes shape:

> The end of the Cold War weakened security concerns in Western Europe and opened new spaces for movements challenging the monopolies of the state. At the same time, the renewed emphasis on universal human rights spilled over into debates about national minorities and their collective rights to language, culture and self-government. In these circumstances, the nationalism of the

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[20] Aaron Kelly, *Irvine Welsh* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2005), 70. Kelly mounts a similar critique of devolution in "James Kelman and the Reterritorialisation of Power" in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, 175-83.

[21] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 26-7.

> stateless altered in its image. Previously labelled as backward and anti-modern, stateless nations and regions came to be identified with the modern and even post-modern.[22]

In this new zeitgeist, writes Berthold Schoene (partly summarizing David McCrone),

> discontinuity and adaptability have become Scotland's cultural trademarks. "Statelessness" and a postcolonial disposition no longer signify lack and inferiority, but harbour a resourceful flexibility. … this powerful critical paradigm shift champions the cultural authenticity of the fragmented, marginalised, shadowy and wounded over that of the allegedly intact, wholesome and self-contained.[23]

It is on these terms that vernacular prose fiction functions as a non-kitsch "display-identity" of the kind required by the cultural and political circumstances of Scotland in the period of devolution. Markedly Scottish English is invested with special national agency and representivity, abetted by a wider (romantic) discourse which figures language as a medium of tradition and communal self-presence; but owing to the ungoverned "flexibility" of vernacular forms, accessing this register of social groundedness does not limit or inhibit the individual's scope for self-fashioning. Indeed, the ec-centric and autonomous valence of non-standard writing bolsters its appeal as a medium for enregistering the individual as free particular.

Trainspotting and Spectacle

Trainspotting is the major landmark in the promotion of a hip "postcolonial" (and perhaps post-political) vision of Scottish culture, articulated within an idiom of angry, undeceived marginality which will countenance no belief in any alternative to atomised subcultures defined by style, attitude and consumption. For Berthold Schoene, its great achievement

> resides in its re-authentication of the Scottish tradition, paradoxically achieved by breaking with it, by asserting a local

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[22] Michael Keating, "Nationalist Movements in Comparative Perspective" in Gerry Hassan, ed., *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009), 204-18 (pp. 206-7).

[23] Schoene, introducing *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, 7.

> rootedness marred by deracination, and by instilling a sense of
> flux and mobility from claustrophobic stagnation.[24]

Trainspotting certainly explodes fantasies of Scottishness (both tartan and
Red Clydeside), but does not replace them with any reality principle
available to novelistic identification, still less a toehold for resistant
solidarity.[25] Here Mark Renton vividly recalls the displacements of a
working-class "schemie" traversing the postcard vistas of central
Edinburgh, unable to inhabit thoroughly alienated and appropriated
space:

> They say you have to live in a place to know it, but you have to
> come fresh tae it tae really see it. Ah remember walkin along
> Princes Street wi Spud, we both hate walkin along that hideous
> street, deadened by tourists and shoppers, the twin curses ay
> modern capitalism. Ah looked up at the castle and thought, it's
> just another building tae us. It registers in oor heids just like the
> British Home Stores or Virgin Records. We were heading tae
> these places oan a shoplifting spree.[26]

This dichotomy of "seeing" and "knowing," in which only the first has
any impact or meaning, should alert us to the novel's complicity with the
forces of consumerism it frequently castigates. Robert Morace argues that
"*Trainspotting* had originally been written against the grain of the
mainstream culture of spectacle which swiftly co-opted it,"[27] but the
novel is locked into a consumerist circuit of desire and display from the
very start, registering in its sensibility the pre-conceived taste of the
Virgin Records stores in which it would eventually appear (and
frequently be stolen).

The fourth edition of Christopher Harvie's *Scotland and Nationalism*
connects the empty coolness of 1990s Scottish identity with a sudden and
dramatic *loss* of firm cultural anchorage. Harvie points to the internet and
economic fragmentation, but the emergence of the vernacular as a source
of *personal* identitarian capital lurks in the background of this picture:

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[24] Schoene, *Edinburgh Companion to Irvine Welsh*, 1.

[25] Willy Maley questions Welsh and Kelman's re-inscription of capitalist individ-
ualism in his "Denizens, citizens, tourists and others: marginality and mobility in
the writings of James Kelman and Irvine Welsh," in *City Visions,* ed. David Bell
and Azzedine Haddour (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 60-72.

[26] Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London: Minerva, 1994), 228.

[27] Robert Morace, "Irvine Welsh: Parochialism, Pornography and Globalisation"
in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, 227-35 (p.
227).

> Scotland's renascent nationalism coincided with market and information revolutions which shattered structures and hierarchies, leaving a hyper-individuation exhausted by its technology, and overwhelmed by its data: deconstructed texts, rejected canons, literature or culture fixed in local constellations.[28]

The "new" Scottish vernacular writing was one such technology, its couthy, communitarian associations retro-fitted by Welsh and the *Trainspotting* marketeers as a consumable token of difference and autonomy. If MacDiarmid's Lallans was "a vehicle for national differentiation and political mobilisation" (Harvie, p. 106), Welsh's vernacular had roughly the opposite valence in the ecology of Cool Britannia, operating as a consumerist register for "edgy," MTV Scottish difference: a stylised pose of subaltern authenticity borrowing heavily from punk and proletarian idioms of marginality. With this language functioning as a quasi-ethnic emblem or badge, and demanding no more than affiliation and self-assertion, the vernacular identity constituted in 1990s Scottish writing operates as a kind of postmodern "voluntarist substitute" (Harvie, p. 211) for the nationalist object of a state, while retaining the aura – and perhaps only the aura – of radical class protest.

As Kirstin Innes observes, the *Trainspotting* phenomena (including the hit film)

> has become not only a cutting-edge brand signifier for a fetishised, cool version of working-class drug culture, but also the most widely globalised representation of contemporary Scottishness. As a result, the particular linguistic code developed by Welsh to articulate the experiential reality of a certain community in a certain part of Edinburgh has become standardised as *the* authentic Scottish voice, both celebrated by the media and eagerly emulated by Welsh's peers and successors.[29]

The language games in which the characters of *Trainspotting* are immersed belong to a postmodern economy of difference – verbal identity is a commodity to be produced, exchanged and discarded in order to realise personal benefits. The vernacular language used to signify some

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[28] Christopher Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics from 1707 to the Present*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 212.

[29] Kirstin Innes, "Mark Renton's Bairns: Identity and Language in the Post-*Trainspotting* Novel," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, 301-9 (p. 301).

real, residual or potential condition of communal rootedness in the Scottish novels of a previous generation (e.g. McIlvanney's *Docherty,* 1975) is exploited in *Trainspotting* as a reservoir of subcultural "grittiness" suited to an international appetite for minoritarian difference. "Much the most important thing about language", writes Anderson, "is its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities.*"[30] But when, as in *Trainspotting*, these solidarities are reduced to badges of stylistic attachment – the verbal equivalent of an Iggy Pop T-shirt – and realised in isolation from any narrative context or sharable social space in which they might be mobilised into collective action or experience, their political valence alters accordingly. The excitement and richness of *Trainspotting*'s polyphony ultimately belong to the order of stylised self-display:

> The Bridges is hotchin wi minge. *Ooh, ooh la la, let's go dancin, ooh, ooh la la, Simon dancin* … There is fanny of every race, colour, creed and nationality present. Oh ya cunt, ye! It's time tae move. Two oriental types consulting a map. Simone express, that'll do nicely. Fuck Rents, he's a doss bastard, totally US.
>
> — Can I help you? Where are you headed? ah ask. *Good old-fashioned Scoattish hoshpitality, aye, ye cannae beat it, shays the young Sean Connery, the new Bond, cause girls, this is the new bondage*…
>
> — We're looking for the Royal Mile, a posh, English-colonial voice answers back in ma face. What a fucking wee pump-up-the-knickers n aw. *Simple Simon sais, put your hands on your feet*…[31]

The novel's kinetic and transgressive blur of languages – nearly always described by reviewers as "exhilarating" and "vital" – figure Balibar's "common acts" in a space beyond lived action or commonality, in a totalised spectacle of difference and authenticity. Demotic speech and demi-monde slang are central to the novel's appeal, and to the ambivalence of a book that rails against commodification while rendering up "voice" for touristic consumption. In a 2007 interview Welsh explains the novel's language in terms both trenchantly anti-colonial and naively romantic:

> Standard English is an imperial language. I wanted something with more rhythm. I actually tried to write *Trainspotting* in standard English and it sounded ridiculous and pretentious. The

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[30] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 133.
[31] Welsh, *Trainspotting*, 28-29.

> vernacular is the language in which we live and think. And it
> sounds better, much more real.[32]

Both inside and outside the fictive world of *Trainspotting*, the surplus
"reality" of its vernaculars are systematically exploited for their cash-
value.

"The New Weegies"

For a younger generation of novelists, the radical intensities of Welsh and
Kelman *are* traditional, and viewed somewhat uncritically. Alan Bissett
sees "new Glasgow writers" such as Suhayl Saadi and Ewan Morrison as
"emulat[ing] Kelman's vernacular achievements", but in postmodern
fictions "saturated with pop culture, iPods, the internet, shopping and
brand names."[33] Recruiting the Glasgow demotic as a "style" available to
re-mixing and imaginative self-fashioning, Bissett sees this writing as
"the Scottish equivalent of hip-hop" insofar as it "chronicles the urban
experience in a politicised and vernacular mode."

> "Mixing" contemporary youth culture's commodity language
> with a Glaswegian syntax and lexicon, they produce a new
> aesthetics, at once local and global, which successfully subverts
> late-capitalist consumerism's signifiers by appropriation and
> recontextualisation. (p. 63)

This strikes me as too hopeful a reading. Just as the creative
"recontextualisation" of a musical sample presupposes its prior reification
– its *de*-contextualisation and reduction to an aural pose – this "bad"
aestheticisation of vernacular language, reducing it to a colourful or gritty
"idiom" available for consumption and political exploitation cannot but
participate in the MTV commodification Bissett sees this "New Weegie"
writing as counter-acting. The semiotic exoticism of the vernacular,
encountered in the context of international popular culture, tends to
reinforce identitarian display by "emptying" (or, to side-step tropes of
romantic embodiment, *shallowing*) the ideological inscription of the
vernacular sign (as socially inferior speech). Far from "eradicating
political, racial and national disparities" (Bissett, p. 63), this difference-
fetishising appetite for signs, motifs and languages encrusted with

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[32] Ian Peddie, "Speaking Welsh: Irvine Welsh in Conversation," *Scottish Studies Review*, 8(1) (2007), 130-139 (p. 137).

[33] Alan Bissett, "The 'New Weegies': The Glasgow Novel in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, 59–67 (p. 63).

historical conflict merely renders them up as exhilarating spectacle to the dislocated cosmopolitan consumer.

How late it was, how late: Beyond "Repping"

By the "parliament of novels" thesis, 1980s Scottish literature stands in for one broken democratic machine before inspiring an upgraded model. Michael Gardiner's primer on *Modern Scottish Culture* installs James Kelman at the heart of this narrative: "dissatisfied with being politically silenced in the 1980s and 1990s, [Scots] had to find a creative solution … Kelman's rise came at a time when Scots were literally finding a political 'voice' in the form of the new Parliament."[34] I suggest that Kelman's best-known novel highlights the limits of conceiving voice as a channel for transmitting "given" identities into pre-constituted representative space.[35] On the contrary, *How late it was, how late* constitutes voice as the medium of *being*, and pungently insists "there's a difference between repping somebody and fucking being somebody."[36] Kelman's narration seems to directly embody the subjectivity and ipseity of his characters – of *The Busconductor Hines* we are told "his language contains his brains and his brains are a singular kettle of fish"[37] – in language which is nonetheless saturated in class, place and Balibar's "common acts" of exchange. With extraordinary immediacy *How late it was, how late* seems to enact rather than describe the drama of Sammy's inner life as he navigates the living moment, but in a relational idiom which de-centres his self-narration into a form of reportage:

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[34] Michael Gardiner, *Modern Scottish Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2005), 155.

[35] Gardiner's reading of *How late it was, how late* as a "direct representation of devolution" therefore strikes me as precisely wrong; Kelman's novel is fore-armed against *intercessionary* mechanisms of agency (see Scott Hames, "Eyeless in Glasgow: James Kelman's Existential Milton," *Contemporary Literature* 50.3 [Autumn 2009], 496-527). Indeed, devolution does the reverse of *How late* in constituting power *as* representation: cf. Michael Gardiner, "Literature, Theory, Politics: Devolution as Iteration," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, 43–50 (p. 49).

[36] James Kelman, *How late it was, how late* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994), 241.

[37] James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines* (Edinburgh: Polygon/Birlinn, 2007), 254

> Quiet voices quiet voices, he was gony have to move man he was gony have to fucking move, now, he stepped back, pushing out the door and out onto the pavement he went left, tapping as quick as he could, keeping into the wall. He hit against somebody but battered on, just to keep going, he was fine man he was okay except this feeling like any minute the wallop from behind, the blow in the back, the quick rush of air then thud, he kept going, head down, the shoulders hunched.[38]

This hyper-naturalist effect cannot but flirt with the positivism of ethnographic writing; words that seem to "precipitate the culture they purport to describe."[39] Yet they also, in Kelman, enregister the particularity of the individual's lifeworld and his freedom from what ethnographic writing (and parliamentary displays of identity) would reify as "given." As a register of autonomy as well as rootedness, vernacular writing resonates with a political condition seeking firm anchorage as well as flexibility, and operating quite comfortably in the zone of "marginality" which casts the Scottish subject as Other vis-à-vis one representative order – Standard English – but without hegemonic obligations to construct and enforce its own.

Take the cartoonish blur of *déraciné* lingo in Kelman's *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free*, in which a "failed fucking immigrant" spends a final night in the USA before flying home/hame to Glasgow. Though the protagonist's inner speech is grounded in Glasgow, what it says dispels any affection for homely *ethos*: "I was an Inkliz-spaking pink-face Caucasian frae a blood-and-soil motherland heil hitler hail mary hullo to king billy."[40] This hyperbolic rejection of roots is a guide to the novel's energetic de-coupling of voice and place. The more Jerry ponders his displacement, the more playfully itinerant his language becomes:

> Nay wonder people got sick of me. Who wants to listen to some girning-faced furnir prick constantly moaning. Why dont ya fuck off hame to yer ayn country and moan. Yeh, precisely, le billet is booked monsieur. So gie us a smoke to celebrate. And a bier, où

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[38] Kelman, *How late it was, how late*, 272. On the "inner heterocentricity" of the novel's protagonist, see Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1999), 102.

[39] Bill Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice: The Transformation of English in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 2009), 128.

[40] James Kelman, *You Have to be Careful in the Land of the Free* (London: Penguin, 2004), 132.

est le bier? Donde está la señorita! Eh hombre, gie us el brekko.
(p. 52)

This estrangement reflects not only his own personal displacement but Jerry's role as a security operative policing his fellow "furnirs" and drifters, holders of "Red Cards" denoting (and paradoxically securing) their status as non-citizens untrusted to settle and naturalise: "I am a non-integratit unassimilatit member of the alienigenae. That to me is important" (p. 151). Embracing this marginal condition and its contingency – his apparent freedom from a stable, "given" identity authenticated by origins – a dizzying array of territorial slangs, jargons and patois are constituted as Jerry's pidgin of unbelonging: "No savvy hombré, I dont fokking know, everyting ees concealed" (p. 159).

When Jerry thinks of "hame," he imagines a static, risible, tourist-board Scotland; and since "all that blood and soil stuff is a joke, it is a fucking joke" (p. 106), he instead constructs himself as a "furnir" in solidarity with the marginalised and oppressed – and perhaps parasitic upon their claims to justice and self-assertion: "My people were slaves as well," Jerry tells his black girlfriend Yasmin, who with dry forbearance "found that hard to believe" (p. 407). With objective exclusion comes freedom from determinate "identity," and license to roam the margins of American culture in romantic freedom. The cartoonish liberties available to those constituted outside the order of standard language and belonging blossom into Kelman's most successful exercise in surreal fancy. Here Jerry recalls some buddy-movie exploits with an Iraqi friend:

Gambling with [Haydar] I went skint umpteen times but through him I landed in some unmissable experiences, occasionally of the Keystone Cops variety.

The women he favoured were no skeenee cheeks my frenn no sir these were women females with the curves and the soft places; and if there was one of each oftimes it was me for the less slender of the duo, and I wasnay grumbling and wouldnay have grumbled; either was fine, mighty fine, although they were always a bit aulder than me.

He wasnay even handsome; a heavyset feller with a big heid and then the fucking lip growth. I thought the mountain man muslim background was all just an excuse for the moostachayo that draped its way ower his fizzog. How in tarnation he got off with women wearing one of them I dont know. He insisted on wearing it but and it was just goddam ludicrous. Like maist of us

> he had a tremendous regard for Pancho Villa but so what, it doesnay mean ye stop shaving.[41]

This play of language – strongly recalling the cartoon voice-work of Mel Blanc – both caters to and scrambles the appetite for colour, otherness and idiosyncrasy which has always formed part of the appeal of vernacular writing. If this text shares in the "kinetic" satisfactions of *Trainspotting*, it also undercuts the fetishism of roots and difference, re-materialising in its own ceaseless dodging language as an arena of political contestation and potential entrapment. The vernacular here is not simply a pliable medium with which the self-choosing individual fashions identity, but a crowded terrain of competing claims to belonging and unbelonging; where "identity" is an ideological inscription with concrete repercussions. Jerry's refusal of origins, territory and everything implied by the notion of "naturalisation" (either in language or migration) locates him outside any fixed order; if this leaves the character paralysed in recollection, speculation and regret, his inner speech is highly charged with vocal *actionality* – and neither discharges this energy in postures of singularity, nor grounds it in pre-given community. Here the vernacular subject struggles for its own protocols of belonging and unbelonging, identity and difference, through its own self-concretion as political utterance.

Voice against Democracy

The semiotic otherness of vernacular writing – its markedness, opacity and code-noise vis-à-vis Standard English – operates both as a principle of rooted communality, and as a state of exception. The decentred cultural condition inscribed by this writing is incommensurate with standardised or official codes of communication and belonging. The resulting posture of *authenticated marginality* becomes the core identity-message of a vernacular Scottishness which refuses the hegemonic obligations of "representation" (e.g. in the democratic order), but remains available for display in the spectacle of "identity."

If we revisit the origins of Scottish devolution in the 1970s, the political limits of this paradigm are plain to see. They are especially clear in the 1973 Kilbrandon report, which set the process of Scottish devolution into deliberately retarded motion. Alarmed by the emergence

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[41] Kelman, *You Have to be Careful*, 64.

of the SNP as a credible electoral force, in 1969 Harold Wilson appointed a Royal Commission on the Constitution headed by Lord Crowther.

> The idea behind this was to give the appearance of doing something, which would avoid the need for real action for as long as the commission was deliberating. According to Wilson, the commission was designed to spend years taking minutes, but in public it gave the appearance that the government was taking the issue seriously. It was hoped that, by the time the commission reported, the SNP would have gone away.[42]

By the time the Commission issued its Report on 31 October 1973, Lord Crowther had died and been replaced by Lord Kilbrandon. The report which bears his name was never intended to provide a clear impetus for government action, but does very clearly envision the problem it is asked to remedy as one of affect and attachment: "the question for us is whether in [Scotland and Wales] the existence of national feeling gives rise to a need for change in political institutions."[43] Indeed, an entire chapter of Kilbrandon is devoted to the nature, strength and implications of "National Feeling." The Commission is continually exercised by whether votes for the SNP – "on any impartial assessment […] a small minority party which has so far failed to consolidate its political position" – reflect a desire for constitutional change, or mere recognition of distinct national identity.

> While Scottish nationalism provides no evidence that the Scottish people as a whole wish to be separated from the rest of the United Kingdom, the nature and strength of the support it has attracted over the years suggest that a substantial body of people in Scotland would be likely to take a favourable view of a change to a system of government which did more than the present system to recognise their separate Scottish identity. (*Royal Commission*, I, 107-8)

Devolution is conceived as the management of "national feeling" and its channelling into territorial forms of identitarian "expression," leaving the structures of government – ironically, the traditional basis of a-cultural, "civic" Scottish political identity – unchallenged and unchanged. The question of "attachment" is carefully separated from that of legitimacy:

> the general impression we have formed is that, while the people of Great Britain as a whole cannot be said to be seriously

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[42] Richard J. Finlay, *Modern Scotland 1914-2000* (London: Profile, 2004), 322.
[43] *Royal Commission on the Constitution 1969-1973*. 2 vols. (London: HM Stationery Office, 1973), I, 102.

dissatisfied with their system of government, they have less attachment to it than in the past and there are some substantial and persistent causes of discontent which may contain the seeds of more serious trouble. We think devolution could do much to reduce the discontent. … It would be a response to national feeling in Scotland and Wales. In so far as the discontent is not regional in character, but arises from unsatisfactory aspects of the relationship between government and the people at large, devolution would probably be of limited value. (*Royal Commission*, I, 331)

The task is to evolve a structure which can successfully contain "feeling," "discontent" and non-attachment otherwise capable of threatening the "regional" unity of UK governance. Devolution is not about "the relationship between government and the people at large" – that is to say, democracy – but about enregistering sub-national difference within UK government structures, so neutralising its potential threat to those structures.[44]

Language, Structures and Feeling

The 1970s narrative by which Scottish "national feeling" is to be managed and accommodated within the standard framework of over-arching British structures – rather than manifested in competing, autonomous structures understood to express Scottish difference – is highly suggestive for grasping the appeal of "vocal" metaphors for the devolved cultural condition. It should be noticed that this general tension between "feeling" and "structure" taps directly into the vernacular *structure of feeling* which privileges concrete experience, living bonds and personal expressivity over artificially mediating political forms. Here "national feeling" is to be assimilated into concessionary mechanisms of the absorptive state ("channelled") in ways that re-inscribe rather than challenge its position outside and above political contestation. The advent of a distinctively "national" Scottish literature, much of it written in a

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[44] The paragraph here cited from Kilbrandon was also excerpted in a House of Commons Research Division "Background Paper" assembled for the benefit of MPs debating concrete devolution proposals in November 1976, suggesting this division of feeling and structure, identity and legitimacy, played a continuing role in the formulation of devolution. "Background Paper 54 [Devolution Proposals 1973-76]." Produced by House of Commons Library Research Division, 1976. Private Papers of George Foulkes. Scottish Political Archive record SPA/GF/ASSEM/2.

language not quite Standard English and not quite "separatist" Scots, strongly resonates with this ideological background. A vernacular language which insists on its difference and authenticity, but stops short of codifying its own standard rules and norms – a literature which "feels Scottish" without departing from the fundamental structures it shares with "English" – acquires a special political valence in this context.

Fig. 1: Three Registers of Scottish Vernacularity

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democratic vernacularity
        (*language as civic space: the common speech*)
rhetoric: formal inclusion/recognition in the political order
claim: representation
aesthetic: display, cipherment
         [formalistic, parliamentary register; vernacular
               sign as second-order "vehicle"]

romantic vernacularity
        (*language as heritage: authentic roots*)
rhetoric: renewal/revival of cultural self-presence
claim: authenticity
         [*vis-a-vis* ethno-cultural tradition/class experience]
aesthetic: embodiment
         [has ethno-cultural and class variants (often
                  conflated)]

identitarian vernacularity
        (*language as spectacle of "identity"*)
rhetoric: sovereignty of self-fashioned linguistic subject
claim: autonomy
aesthetic: performance
         [fetishism of linguistic difference]

We could say that vernacular writing refuses the standardising obligations of "government" which come with settled form, preferring the provisional and unfinalised character of language developing immanently *within* culture, and eschewing any fixed civic or constitutional principle authorising – but also "containing" – its possibilities. By this reading, political devolution is about the containment and deferral of nationalist *agency*; a prevention of action in favour of representation and mere "activity."[45] Vernacular language becomes a way of disguising the limits of this process, presenting a "legitimised" medium of representation as a form of action, and basis of real cultural power, in its own right.

Three Registers of Scottish Vernacularity

Having surveyed some of the literary and political contexts in which it operates, we can sketch three overlapping registers of Scottish vernacularity in the period of devolution. The table opposite is no more than a provisional model, and is not intended to function as a diagnostic grid; my hope is that it provides a starting point in developing a stronger critical vocabulary for mapping interactions between democratic, romantic and identitarian registers of Scottish vernacularity. It may also be of use in mapping the politics of the vernacular in other literary contexts.

Conclusion: Fetishising Representation

The primary purpose and function of devolution is to re-legitimise rather than reform the inherited Westminster system – "a policy of a strikingly conservative character," notes Vernon Bogdanor, concerned chiefly to "renegotiate the terms of the Union so as to make them more palatable to Scottish opinion in the conditions of the late twentieth century."[46] James Mitchell notes the fetishisation of *representation* within this discourse:

> the emphasis amongst campaigners for devolution was to ensure that the Scottish Parliament would be a truly new representative institution, reflecting Scottish opinion to a degree than the West-minster system permitted, in order to ensure that Scotland did not suffer the imposition of policies it did not vote for again. […] It was as if the creative energies of [the new parliament's] support-ers concentrated on questions of representation. All would be well

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[45] See Michael Gardiner, "Literature, Theory, Politics," as in n. 35 above.
[46] Vernon Bogdanor, *Devolution in the United Kingdom*, Rev ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 119.

> so long as the new institution embodying Scottish interests was representative.[47]

Devolved institutions, in overtly "recognising" the existence of national feeling, would assimilate it to the sphere of "representation" – that is, the sphere of democratic spectacle. In essence, Scottish nationalism was to be neutralised via a "release" which was truly a containment. I suggest that the fetishisation of linguistic difference in Scottish literary studies has unwittingly re-inscribed this logic, in which the display of reified "Scottish identity" is equated with neo-national liberation.

Pervasive tropes of voice cement the expression of Scottishness with a demand for autonomy; a demand premised on romantic investments, but discharged in postmodern currency, "fulfilled" by the instatement of an autonomous *order of representation* (in truth, an identitarian *extension* – a new particularist branch-office – of central authority). We should recall that parliamentary representation is founded on absence and substitution.[48] Reified as a display-event within pre-constituted representative space, even those stirring voices saturated with "roots," uttering the most stinging rebukes to institutional power, are incorporated within its legitimising rituals. Under the rubric of democratic spectacle the vernacular can never generate *new form* out of its own unsettled and illegible status; voice functions as a deployment of representative power, rather than *grounding* the contestation of agency, otherness and recognition.[49] Incorporated by hegemonic power as a sign of its own generous flexibility, this democratic "voice" occludes the utopian vernacular utterance which realises its own *action* and authorises its own claims to liberty and presence.

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[47] James Mitchell, "Devolution without Self-Government" in Gerry Hassan and Rosie Ilett, eds., *Radical Scotland: Arguments for Self-Determination* (Edinburgh: Luath, 2011), 29-39 (p. 30).

[48] See Hannah F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), 54, and Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988), 39.

[49] On "the relational valence of the vocal sphere" and "the relationality already put in action by the simple reciprocal communication of voices," see Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. by Paul A. Kottmann (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005), 7, 16.