

## Editorial: Theory and Scottish Exceptionalism

Not even its most passionate informed detractors quite *regret* theory, or dismiss it as a trivial fad. 'There is no doubt in my mind that Theory has really revitalized the study of literature since the Second World War', writes Valentine Cunningham, in a book mainly lamenting the trite, mechanical, tactless readerly habits theory has undoubtedly spread. 'In many respects, reading is so much more alive under the impact of Theory than it was; texts have in many ways become so much more vividly present, so much richer and deeper, in their newly acquired valencies.'<sup>[1]</sup>

Why, then, has criticism of Scottish literature largely ignored theory? Most obviously, because theory 'defies the narrow syllabus, the list of the readable and studiable drawn up on narrow criteria, especially on some (now) patently obvious ideological basis' (p. 44). Scottish literature can be strangely evasive about its patently obvious ideological basis, partly to affect a mien of respectable academic aloofness (i.e. as no more 'ideological' than English literature). At the level of appearances, omitting to jump on the theory bandwagon helped to bolster Scottish literature's self-image as a separate field of study, subject to different intellectual currents. Several articles in this edition of *IJSL* suggest deeper reasons, and argue that Scottish literature's reluctance to engage with theory owes more to its over-reliance on categories of cultural tradition and national literary history, frequent targets of theory's corrosive gaze. But in a sense we need look no further than the *institutional* politics of the discipline to see why theory has been, with few exceptions, simply and quietly ignored in Scottish literary studies. Viewed against wider horizons, side-stepping theory can be seen as one of Scottish literature's enabling conditions during the period of its establishment as a semi-distinct field – a period overlapping almost exactly with theory's renovation of the wider discipline of English.

What Liam Connell neatly summarises as the 'structural nationalism in the concept of Scottish literature'<sup>[2]</sup> made a certain evasion of theory inevitable. As Connell notes, 'the development of Scottish literature can be seen to have produced its own marginalization in an academic context' (p. 12), a marginalisation (in relation to English) which functions as a mobilising grievance while

also grounding claims to a separate, quasi-colonised identity. A particular vision of 'English' is crucial to this exceptionalism:

The development of Scottish literature as a conceptually discrete area of study effectively reconfigured English literature as a narrow, nationally based tradition, which had incorporated writing from its 'peripheries' as the cost of 'any role' for that work 'within the culture from which its author derived.' The formation of Scottish literature as an object of study saw the articulation, both explicit and implicit, of a nationalist rationale that claimed ownership over the writing of Scots and demanded a conceptual repatriation of that writing from English literature ... effectively demanding that English literature become a nationalist phrase in Scottish literature's own image. (p. 13)<sup>[3]</sup>

Constructed this way, 'Scottish literature' is beholden to a foil-discipline which theory clearly jeopardised (and has by now largely dismantled). Writing on Irish nationalism, Terry Eagleton observes that 'all oppositional politics ... move under the sign of irony, knowing themselves ineluctably parasitic on their antagonists'.<sup>[4]</sup> Ideologies of national liberation are nourished by the very oppression they seek to render, with their own necessity, obsolete. In just this way, theory threatens to deprive Scottish literature of its definitional other.

The price of the assumption that Scottish literature is 'given', only waiting to be uncovered and rescued from Anglocentric suppression, has been Scottish literature's need to sustain this straw-man image of 'Eng. Lit.' – obsessed by Eliotic 'tradition', careless of peripheral particularities, smugly hostile to linguistic difference, essentially Leavisite. But this vision of English has been in retreat for forty years, and is all but unrecognisable today. It has been replaced by an energetically self-questioning discipline which comfortably – perhaps even decadently – regards its own canons and cultural prestige as open to all manner of critique, sees 'tradition' as a provisional construct of little structural importance to the field's shape or purview, and locates identity within the field of textuality rather than history. Each of these insights have, of course, been liberally and productively 'applied' to texts claimed by 'Scottish literature', but their implications for the separate *field* constituted under that flag have been largely unheeded. In the effort to achieve separation, theoretical double-standards abound:

Scottish literary criticism has been far too willing to accept the immanence of 'Scottish literature' without conceding it [sic] constructedness or charting the processes and motivations behind such construction. This is certainly surprising given how frequently the idea of 'English literature' is identified as construct within such criticism. (Connell, p. 16)

From a quite different angle, Scotland turns out to have privileged access to the energies of theory, so long as these are understood to affirm precisely the Scottish exceptionalism which theory would challenge were it encountered as an extrinsic discourse. By positioning theory as *inhering* in Scottish literature – smuggled under the kilt in a gesture of recuperation – the need to engage with theory at the level of critique is passed over in silence. By this pattern the ‘marginal’ valence of Scottish literature not only exempts cultural nationalism from critique, but re-casts it as a subordinated critical language actually *validated* by theory (conceived as a general repudiation of Eng. Lit.’s blinkered arrogance).

Theory has its disastrous legacies, of course; but endlessly reading ‘Scottish texts’ as realist artefacts embodying Scottish cultural history, or as imaginative expressions of Scottish psychological accents, is not an impressive alternative. The practice of forcing the text to be handmaiden to something provably ‘Scottish’ outside itself – as ‘reflective of Scottish origins and experience’<sup>[5]</sup> – has inhibited the critical reception of Scottish writers as *writers*. Viewed in narrowly political terms, the refusal of theory is even more surprising; the (by now) routine insistence that representation, language and textuality are enmeshed in cultural power has obvious relevance to any active literary nationalism.

The ‘Irish parallel’ is probably too often drawn in this context, but it intrudes suggestively when Cunningham praises the salutary impact of post-colonial approaches, and their construction of various ‘criticisms of one’s own’.

You, the Brit or American, are now invited to read ‘as an Indian’, or ‘as an African’, to read as they did, and do. The new reading will be for you an eye-opener, a new access to interpretative power with those texts. For the Indian or African it will mean empowerment in the sense of hermeneutic status, political justification, and intellectual, emotional satisfaction. [...] Such emergences [...] undoubtedly provide reading satisfaction to the emergent interpreters, clearly happy to find a fit (often a fit *at last*) between their selfhoods, their emotional proclivities, their ideological and racial dispositions, and so on, and what they are reading – even if the ‘fit’ is a negative, adversarial one [...] Feeling at home in a text and in a theoretical approach ... is clearly a good thing. [...] Clearly, recognizing the importance, even the necessity, of such a fit as part of the hook, the engagement, the vital contract and contact between text and reader, is of course what puts Irish writing high on the agenda of Irish and Scottish universities... (p. 48)

This lop-sided example – ‘Irish writing’ in ‘Irish and Scottish universities’ – is a curious omission; but does it reflect a lapse on Cunningham’s part, or Scottish literature’s? It could be argued that

the assumed 'Brit' identity of the normative critical reader reflects just how easy 'mainstream' English criticism has found it to ignore Scottish literature's trumpeted emergence (within the register of marginality), and its 'political justifications'. The uncomfortable truth is that focusing its energies on the marking-out of a separate territory for initiates – those trained to recognise and affirm the Scottishness of certain writers, ideas, motifs, and histories; those prepared to 'feel at home' in Scottish exceptionalism – has made Scottish literature more of a curiosity than a challenge to English criticism in general. From the outside, it often seems a school fixated by its own self-perpetuated marginality, and with historical, political and philosophical Scottishnesses at several removes from literary judgement or aesthetic encounter.

Scottish literature needs urgently to engage with modern critical discourse surrounding cultural tradition, literary history, linguistic identity and 'internationalism'. The strength, range and insight of the articles in this issue demonstrate that taking theory seriously has nothing to do with chasing bandwagons, and everything to do with the 'vital contract between text and reader' of which Cunningham writes. He places undue emphasis on the cultural identities of 'emergent interpreters' – 'reading as a Scot' would carry its own essentialist baggage, and acutely so in 'international' settings. But his argument highlights the necessity of giving negative, adversarial approaches a fair hearing, and of acknowledging that one's cherished self-image cannot be sealed off from 'outsiders' and remain intellectually honest.

## NOTES

[1] Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 39.

[2] Liam Connell, 'Modes of Marginality: Scottish Literature and the Uses of Postcolonial Theory', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23:1&2 (2003), p. 4. Connell's article is available online at [http://perseus.herts.ac.uk/uhinfo/library/people/pdf/pub\\_717992.pdf](http://perseus.herts.ac.uk/uhinfo/library/people/pdf/pub_717992.pdf)

[3] Connell's quotations are from Cairns Craig's *Out of History*.

[4] Terry Eagleton, *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1988), p. 7.

[5] Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel: A Critical Survey* (London: John Murray, 1978), ix.