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We have Never been Theoretical: Scottish Literature in Theory

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I After Theory

The question animating this article is whether Scottish literature is ‘after’ theory, but it contains a postulate that requires an initial parsing, namely, the assumption that a relationship to theory already exists. Accordingly, in this first section I examine the current relationship of Scottish literature to theory within the context of the post-millennial ‘after theory’ debates, while in the second section I foreground one particular discussion within world-literature theory, analysing Emily Apter’s treatment of the ‘New Scotologists’ from *The Translation Zone* in order to indicate the possible contribution of Scottish literature to a current theory of world-literature as conceived by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) in their provocative 2015 collaboration, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*.¹ As Christopher Whyte remarked in his Letter to the Editors of the *International Journal of Scottish Literature* special issue on ‘Theory and Scottish Exceptionalism’ in 2007, ‘[t]heory can mean a multitude of different things’.² Conjoined with the preposition ‘after’, it circumscribes a specific age, one increasingly given the label of ‘high theory’ but which effectively signifies French poststructuralism and the advent of continental philosophy into the academy. It also indicates two contrary dispositions: the first, a reactionary claim that theory is no longer relevant – that we are ‘after’ the age of theory – and the second, a fidelity to the discipline which counters that, although the epoch of ‘high theory’ has passed, it nonetheless remains relevant even at the same time as a new contemporary theory simultaneously flourishes in a diffuse and atomised configuration. Since the turn of the twenty-first century a profusion of monographs have

¹ Emily Apter, ‘The Language of Damaged Experience’ in *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: 2006), 149–59; Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool, 2015).

² Christopher Whyte, ‘Occasional Paper: The Debt to Theory; Letter to the Editors of *IJSL*’, *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, Issue 3 Autumn/Winter 2007, 1–7 (2).

argued the latter position;³ while lone voices within Scottish literary studies were calling for the belated entrance into theory of a discipline traditionally resistant to it, its death and paradoxical survival were being debated elsewhere in the academy.⁴ If Scottish literature wished to come to theory after the fact, the question of whether it is ‘after theory’ might be similarly belated within a debate that belongs quintessentially to the decade post-millennium.

Writing in 2010, Nicholas Birns noted that the academic world was perceived already by the early 2000s ‘to be living in an age “after theory”’ (Birns, 11). In the self-titled *After Theory*, published in 2003, Terry Eagleton outlined the nuanced terms of that supersession:

The golden age of theory is long past [...]. Those to whom the title of this book suggests that ‘theory’ is now over, and that we can all relievedly return to an age of pre-theoretical innocence, are in for a disappointment. [...] If theory remains a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever. But we are living now in the aftermath of what one might call high theory, in an age which, having grown rich on the insights of thinkers like Althusser, Barthes and Derrida, has also in some ways moved beyond them. (Eagleton, 1–2)

If theory is our past, therefore, it is also our future; Eagleton’s assessment is close to the Eliotic position that ‘they are that which we know’, a knowledge and legacy that is historicised but assimilated.⁵ Concurrent with this continued legacy of high theory is the contemporary ‘theory renaissance’ heralded by Vincent B. Leitch, who confirms the ongoing importance of twentieth-century movements alongside what he identifies as a new, proliferating and disaggregated twenty-first century theory, and dismisses

³ See, for example: Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford, 2002); Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London, 2003); Nicholas Birns, *Theory After Theory: An Intellectual History of Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century* (Peterborough, Ont., 2010); Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (eds.), *Theory After Theory* (Abingdon and New York, 2011).

⁴ For discussions of Scottish Literature and theory see, for example: Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller (eds.), *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture and Literature* (Amsterdam and New York, 2004); Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory since 1960* (Edinburgh, 2006); Eleanor Bell and Scott Hames (eds.), *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, Issue 3 Autumn/Winter 2007.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1922) in Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn. (London, 1966), 13–22, at 16.

as reactionary the possibility of being ‘after’ theory in the abject sense by asserting that ‘[a]ntitheory and posttheory sentiments of recent decades only make sense in the context of theory as a dominant paradigm’.⁶ Leitch testifies to a persisting anxiety within the academy to ‘know’ the latest theory, arguing that this gestures to a market logic in which theory becomes ‘swept up in fashion’, including, presumably, the fashion for ‘after’ or no-theory, predicated on and reincorporated into the theoretical paradigm.⁷

The declaration of being ‘after theory’ thus seems a now-passé trend within the temporality of theory itself, ‘after’ therefore signifying a renewed thriving of theory pursuant on its classical twentieth-century formations, as Jeffrey R. Di Leo suggests when endorsing the Leitch position in his introduction to *Dead Theory* (2016).⁸ What is now simultaneously constructed as the ‘after’ and, by virtue of that ‘after’, the future of theory, risks however becoming profoundly anti-theoretical in many of its forms. Certain new epistemologies embody a renewed humanism that hazards reinforcing and reproducing late capitalist ideology in the guise of either a promotion of the material, or a reversion to the experiential, the affective and the individual. To accept theory in this qualified mode evinces a misapprehension contingent on a perceived rebalance towards a conceived politics or ethics of the everyday and is further implicated in, rather than challenging of, a tendency towards valorisation of the empirical as illustrated by the proliferation of science-based ‘studies’ and the mimetic language of science within the humanities. For this reason, it is especially disquieting that among this twenty-first-century profusion of theory are contemporary discourses claiming the ground of the ethical in

⁶ Vincent B. Leitch, *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century: Theory Renaissance* (London and New York, 2014), 151.

⁷ Leitch, 153. This is particularly true in a U.K. context of grant-capture pressure within the academy and the empiricism privileged by that approach, which demonstrates that the death or survival of theory is partly governed not by intellectual currents but by the market forces that seek to institute as an intellectual position capital-driven methodologies and modes of inquiry.

⁸ Jeffrey R. Di Leo (ed.), *Dead Theory: Derrida, Death and the Afterlife of Theory* (London and New York, 2016), 1–3. A passing observation made by Di Leo is also salient in beginning to illuminate the resistance of Scottish literary studies to theory. He remarks that a sense of ‘disciplinary homelessness’ attached to theory, constructed as it was outside of the instituted Humanities disciplines, such that ‘[d]epartments who allowed it entry did so at their own peril – a peril fraught with the potential of disrupting their traditional self-identity’ (Di Leo, 4). The implications for the composition of Scottish Literature as a proper identity are clear, as is the threat that theory, concerned philosophically with destabilisation and interdisciplinarily constituted, might be perceived to pose.

contradistinction to what is then postulated as 'high theory', locating novelty in a self-perceived turn towards praxis by which they too seek to identify as both 'after' theory, and as the 'after' of theory by which they are formed through that epochal break. This fundamental misunderstanding of theory's genealogy implies that the theory of language particularly may be figured as a moment through which we have passed, rather than one which, as Eagleton states, has been assimilated and must remain foundational to our reading strategy and understanding of literature thereafter. There is no way we can legitimately claim to be 'after theory' in this sense: on the one hand, such a declaration comes from an explicitly dialectical position that misapprehends theory's history in order to efface the dialectic strategy and to claim this temporal divide. On the other, it also re-enters that opposition back into theory, insofar as the claim, by positing an 'after' of theory, occupies a metaphysical position.

Not only are we not then 'after theory', it might be suggested that there can be no 'after' of theory, either in a disciplinary sense within the academy or *qua* theory itself. In his invocation of an Enlightenment-to-come in 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project?', Jürgen Habermas argued in support of a theory of communicative reason against postmodernism and those 'Young Conservatives' who

[...] essentially appropriate the fundamental experience of aesthetic modernity, namely the revelation of a decentred subjectivity liberated from all the constraints of cognition and purposive action, from all the imperatives of labour and use value, and with this they break out of the modern world altogether. [...] [I]n Manichaean fashion [they] oppose instrumental reason with a principle accessible solely to evocation, whether this is the will to power or sovereignty, Being itself or the Dionysian power for the poetic. In France this tradition leads from Georges Bataille through Foucault to Derrida. Over all these figures hovers, of course, the spirit of Nietzsche, newly resurrected in the 1970s.⁹

It is evident even in his characterisation of a 'postmodernism' synonymous with nihilism that, at this stage at least, Derridean postructuralism has not

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project?' (1980), trans. Nicholas Walker in Maurizio Passerin D'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (eds.), *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1997), 38–55 at 53.

been fully confronted, but nonetheless for Habermas modernity is unfinished because the Enlightenment project remains to-come, and the stakes are located in the necessity to overcome or achieve precisely that ‘after’ of theory that would allow the project to be realised. This debate is structured explicitly as one of temporality: of the past and the future, or, to invoke the parameters of this volume, ‘before’ and ‘after’. Such bracketing within disciplines speaks to the time of theory in an attempt to absent theory, by figuring it as an epochal movement; a function achieved by constructing a beginning and an end of theory that frame it as already belonging to an historic past.

As outlined thus far, the question can therefore be framed as either historical or conceptual, as one of Scottish Literature in a post-theory era or as one that considers Scottish Literature in relation to theory. Addressing the latter, to propose that Scottish Literature can claim such a division as ‘before’ and ‘after’ implicitly presupposes having first been theoretical: of being in theory, so to speak. Structurally, if not individually, this has not been the case. To paraphrase Bruno Latour, we have never been theoretical.¹⁰ In the introduction by Eleanor Bell and Scott Hames to the 2007 journal issue quoted above, the editors approached the question of how Scottish literary criticism had, even at that late point, ‘largely ignored theory’, citing as dual contributing factors a disciplinary denial of its ideological basis, and its institutional constitution in opposition to an English Literature which had embedded theory into its practice. Within the same issue, Alex Thomson emphasised the problematic for theory of a national literary history which presupposes a national narrative in order to establish a symbiosis between literary and political autonomy.¹¹ The remainder of this section engages with Thomson’s argument, and specifically its discussion of a national paradigm in literature, to assess the continued eschewal of theory by Scottish literary studies more than a decade after Bell and Hames’s analysis.

As Thomson argues that national historiography constructs rather than describes national identity, this is implicitly then also true of a literary historiography wherein historicist methodologies of interpretation assume a prior understanding of the text as an expression of that identity. This ‘extrinsic’ critical method refers the text to the nation so that, as Thomson contends,

¹⁰ Cf. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA, 1993).

¹¹ Eleanor Bell and Scott Hames, ‘Editorial: Theory and Scottish Exceptionalism’, *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, Issue 3 Autumn/Winter 2007, 1–4 (1); Alex Thomson, “‘You can’t get there from here’: Devolution and Scottish literary history’, *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, Issue 3 Autumn/Winter 2007, 1–20.

'[n]ational identity here is not so much the product of historiographical analysis as the organising principle of its narrative construction' (Thomson, 5–6).¹² An ideologically determined historiography narrativises a history that it then renarrativises *as* history, through the material support of a textual evidence that is already conceptually regulated. Thus, '[f]ramed in national terms, the study of literature in Scotland will always tend to become the analysis of Scottish literature, and ultimately, of what is "Scottish" about that literature' (Thomson, 6). Thomson situates what he terms this 'national principle' within the context of the 'national paradigm' identified by Christopher Whyte and Laurence Nicoll,¹³ according to which Scottish literature is governed by what might also be called a national 'dominant' through which the literariness of the text, and literary criticism *per se*, is subordinated to a view of literature as a documentary representation and expression of national identity mobilised by historical reading.¹⁴ Whyte aspired to the dissolution of the national paradigm in a post-devolution literary landscape, writing in 1998 that '[o]ne can hope that the setting up of a Scottish parliament will at last allow Scottish literature to be literature first and foremost, rather than the expression of a nationalist movement';¹⁵ Scott Hames remarked in 2007 that Whyte's call to what is essentially intrinsic reading continued to be a 'still-distant critical condition' (Hames in Schoene, p. 246), and it remains so ten years later. While Thomson also argues for the autonomy of the text, he contends that theory has been utilised for two purposes in Scottish literary history, both of which

¹² Thomson derives his usage of 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' from René Wellek and Andrew Warren, defined as follows: '[a]n intrinsic approach to literature focuses on the work of art as an autonomous artefact; an extrinsic approach seeks to explain particular works, or the development of series of works, in relation to social, political or historical events' (Thomson, 2).

¹³ See Whyte, *Modern Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh, 2004) and the 'cultural nationalist paradigm' in Laurence Nicoll, "'This Is Not a Nationalist Position": James Kelman's Existential Voice', *Edinburgh Review*, 103 (2000), 79–84 at 79. Both are also cited, with accompanying discussion, in Scott Hames, 'Don Paterson and Poetic Autonomy' in Berthold Schoene (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh, 2007), 245–54 at 246.

¹⁴ See also Hames and Bell's introduction to the issue, where they discuss the national paradigm and its limiting effect on the reception of Scottish Literature, and Hames in Schoene, where it is termed the "culturalising' tendency' (247). In his Introduction to the collection, Berthold Schoene quaintly describes the intrinsic approach as 'Whyte's promotion of an aesthetic turn in Scottish literature and criticism' (Schoene, 7–8), and a 'renegade gesture' (Schoene, 8).

¹⁵ Christopher Whyte, 'Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 34.2 (1998), 274–85 (284); also cited by Hames in Schoene, 246.

are impedimentary to that autonomy. According to his reading it serves first to legitimise Scottish literature as an object of study, particularly in the period between the failed independence bid of 1979 and the granting of devolution in 1997, wherein there is an investment in the postmodernism of Scottish literature as an index for national postmodernity (Thomson, 12). Its second function is to negotiate the competing claims of a national literature which also adheres to and, within the national paradigm, must reflect, values of 'liberal multiculturalism', thus resolving the tension between the need for a singular national literature and the simultaneous necessity for that literature to endorse a desire for the diverse, in so far as diversity constitutes a celebratory signifier of a non-essentialist nation.¹⁶ When viewed from this perspective theory supports rather than critiques 'romantic nationalist positions', serving as a 'theoretical nationalism' (Thomson, 13).

While critics identify the late-coming of theory into the discipline as a function of canon-formation and traditionalism, or of literary historiography, the common discussion of the national paradigm within such debates perhaps points to the continued problematic of theory within Scottish literature as a symptom of a more profound disquiet: its belated entrance into Scottish literature may not indicate a primary attitude to theory, but a preordained relation dictated by the extension of the national dominant already extant in what Whyte critiques as the evacuation of literary criticism from 'Scottish literature' understood as an extension and representation of the nation. That same relation may furthermore be argued to govern the apparent admission of theory into Scottish literature, however qualified. In 2004, Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller identified 'a lingering parochialism' in Scottish literary studies, attributed to that same paradigm whereby 'literature from Scotland must first be explained in terms of its Scottishness, rather than in terms of its history or aesthetic qualities'; they proposed a futurity through theory for a Scottish literature which had (even into the new millennium and in the year of Derrida's death) suffered an 'absence of, and perhaps resistance to, newer forms of thinking', drawing a comparative analogy with Ireland and its rich engagement with theory.¹⁷ In that the evidence cited for the engagement of

¹⁶ Thomson points to the importance of Bakhtinian readings in this project, his heteroglossia a model 'that looks attractive if projected onto the nation' as it promotes heterogeneity within the ostensibly unitary (Thomson, 12).

¹⁷ Bell and Miller, 11; also cited in Hames in Schoene, 246. That this section of my argument traces several examples of evidence also included in Hames's argument emphasises that the contours of the question have remained collectively (if not individually) relatively static, ten years later.

Irish literature with theory was a proliferation of books on 'postmodernism, postcolonialism, and feminist readings of nationalism and national identity' (Bell and Miller, 11), a partial reading of the Irish field emerges that signals an underlying difference between Scottish and Irish literary-critical perspectives. The disciplinary structuration of both literatures arguably differs in part due to the ceding of a national dominant in Irish literature, a function of the political construction of the Republic and the North, but also of its sympathy to theory as an effect of the interrelation of Irish literature with modernism and the subsequent correspondence of theory to modernism. If Irish literary studies embraced poststructuralist theory from the 1980s onwards it is largely because of that affinity of theory to modernism, the international emergence of which was already indexed to Irish literature through the figures of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Flann O'Brien, among others, while the Scottish Renaissance was conversely not appropriated to the same extent to academic narratives of its formation. The identification of modernism and theory as homologous, inhering particularly in their mutual concern with language and formalism, consequently engenders intrinsic aesthetic reading, resulting in Irish literary studies assuming the literary focus aspired to by Whyte, yet still absent in Scottish literature. The different statuses of Irish and Scottish literature as national literatures could suggestively be linked to divergent foundational relations to theory as grounded in differential relationships to modernism, as much as their ongoing relation, or non-relation, to theory is predicated upon those foundations as dictated by the institution of literary and national paradigmatic methodologies respectively. While nation is prominent in Irish critical discussions, it is arguably not the critical paradigm, and the identification of national approaches to theory in Bell and Miller's appraisal of Irish literary criticism could be construed more accurately as reflecting the dominance of that principle in Scottish criticism.

While their call advocates for the postmodern and postnational, Bell is yet moved simultaneously to state that

the inclusion of postmodern and postnational readings of the nation here are not intended to negate the importance of tradition and tradition-inspired readings. Rather, the objective is to suggest that these newer discourses may help enrich historical readings rather than undermine the discipline in an unscholarly fashion.¹⁸

¹⁸ Eleanor Bell, 'Postmodernism, Nationalism and The Question of Tradition' in Bell and Miller, (eds.), *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture and Literature* (Amsterdam and

Where the self-determination of a nation depends on consensus, an implicit equivocation regarding relativism is understandable, as is a rejection of theory wherein the nation could be referred to a signifier rather than understood as a referent. In the classical Freudo-Marxist construction, theory destabilises epistemological categories such as nation; its rejection emphasises the dependence of Scottish literary studies upon that category, and on the construction of nation via culture. In the excerpt above Bell refers to ‘postmodern and postnational readings of the *nation*’ (Bell, 86, emphasis mine), rather than of its literature, implying that the two are synonymous and that national literature is therefore an ideological category rather than a descriptive taxonomy of a locus of production. For that reason, theory must first be brought to bear upon the national dominant before it can be employed within a literary studies that is under its sway; the very fact of the latter, however, precludes the former and further prevents the entrance of theory into Scottish literature. This emphasis upon the national-theoretical resonates with their earlier statement that ‘many Scottish critics recognise the need for plural readings of *nationhood*’ rather than literature (Bell and Miller, 11, emphasis mine), but in adhering to the national dominant it opposes rather than supports the explication of text through its ‘literary or aesthetic qualities’ to which the ostensible call to enter into theory is addressed. What has been admitted into Scottish literary studies as theory are instead concepts and lenses for conceiving nation (e.g. Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities;¹⁹ Bakhtinian heteroglossia²⁰); theory of national literatures (e.g. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s minor literature;²¹ the archipelagic modernism of John Brannigan²²); and postcolonialism and postmodernism, where direct equivalences could be drawn with political and cultural states as predicated upon a geographical framework.

Cleaving to a predominantly socio-political formulation, postmodernist readings align again with the national paradigm and are appealing precisely because they allow for the continued avoidance not only of theory but also

New York, 2004), 83–96 at 86.

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), 2nd edn. (London and New York, 2006).

²⁰ See M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981). Cf Thomson.

²¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), trans. Dana Polan and foreword by Réda Bensmaïa (Minneapolis, 1986).

²² John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism: Literature in the Irish and British Isles, 1890–1970* (Edinburgh, 2014).

of literature, such as in Katherine Ashley's welcoming of a postmodern Scottish literary scene, with its discrepancies between traditional views of Scottishness and twenty-first-century production, on the basis that '[f]ortunately, these discrepancies are beginning to be addressed in such a way that Scottish literature is being freed from its traditional shackles and is being interpreted as the expression of a fully modern nation'.²³ An appropriation of the vocabulary of the postmodern here retains the national as dominant, while quieting those previously expressed fears of relativism that adhere to a theorised postmodernity; within this conception the 'postmodern' means diversity of identity, broadening that nation out to a necessary heterogeneity that nonetheless confirms and sustains the national model as a justification for the continued turn from theory and from a study of literature that is its precondition. Thomson points out that '[h]ailing the alien within has become the boast of Scotland's democratic aesthetic' (Thomson, 7). If juxtaposed however with the observation that we may come to understand, through theory, that, as Julia Kristeva writes, '[t]he foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners',²⁴ then to be confronted with the suggestion that we are strangers, not only to each other but to ourselves, disrupts the presupposition of stable identity, both personal and national, required for a mode of nation-construction contingent on identity. As such, it deconstructs a national unity, even one established on ethnic heterogeneity. A lexicon of alterity and inclusivity can further veil investments with which it is apparently at odds; as Terry Eagleton notes, 'capitalism is an impeccably inclusive creed: it really doesn't care who it exploits' (Eagleton, 19), and as globalisation continues to leverage difference, concepts of macro-identity – the transnational, postnational, etc. – and of micro-identity – plurality and diversity on the individual level – can become appropriated to its extension on the national plane.

'Theory' could then be argued quite literally to have been mapped onto Scottish literature in an extension of the national dominant upon which it is also called to strengthen, its putative entrance occluding the perpetuation of that paradigm, glossing rather than challenging the underlying need to move towards a literary critical model. It could be mooted as a result that Scottish literature has not yet been in theory: the required shift of dominant from

²³ Katherine Ashley, 'Scots Abroad: The International Reception of Scottish Literature' in Berthold Schoene (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh, 2007), 345–53 at 345.

²⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1991), 172.

national to literary critical paradigm has not yet taken place. Maintaining an umbilical link between the nation and its literature, where the latter is modelled as an expression and substrate of the former, locates literature predominantly within an area studies model as a cultural rationale for nationhood and privileges an historicist methodology that seeks to establish connections between text and context. The apparent progression towards theory (and even the possibility of being ‘after’ theory) provides an alibi for the dominant in so far as, so conceived, it allows space for its continuation, whereas a decoupling of the literary from the national paradigm would potentially allow for a maturation of the discipline as a signifier of a more developed Scottish nation with autonomous cultural spheres that are not primarily understood and interpreted as proxies for the nation.

To be in theory also entails the achievement of a stage where the national model has ceded to autonomous and intrinsic reading. This stage has not yet been achieved, partly because, where the nation remains culturally out of joint with its political state, literature remains both a privileged symbolic site and, with reference to literariness, a secondary one. Alex Thomson draws attention to the statement, made by Liam McIlvanney, that Scottish literature operates “‘as a kind of substitute or virtual polity’”.²⁵ Thomson perceives the connection being made as one of ‘aesthetic achievement [as the] forerunner of political autonomy’ (Thomson, 4), yet there is also arguably a deeper conflation of cultural particularity, as discerned in the literary sphere, with a political autonomy that (as Thomson indicates elsewhere in his article) relies upon cultural exceptionalism as a grounds for self-determination. This is closer to Ryan D. Shirey’s argument that the national paradigm endures because the nation is reliant upon culture to legitimise its construction in lieu of a legal legitimisation, so that ‘consequently, it is the objects of culture that come to stand in as a substitute for the non-existence of a state-sanctioned political identity’.²⁶ To be ‘after theory’ might imply either a reversion or a

²⁵ Liam McIlvanney, ‘The Politics of Narrative in the Post-War Scottish Novel’, in *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. by Zachary Leader (Oxford, 2002), 181–208 at 186, cited in Thomson, 4.

²⁶ Ryan D. Shirey, ‘A Shrinking Highlands: Neil Gunn, Nationalism, and the ‘World Republic of Letters’, *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, Issue 3 Autumn/Winter 2007, 1–20 (2). As Scott Hames has recently observed, in discussion of Duncan McLean’s declaration of a ‘parliament of novels’, ‘this narrative of antecedence is now a commonplace in Scottish literary criticism, though it is often unclear whether the primacy of culture is a matter of causation, displacement or surrogacy – culture driving politics, culture instead of politics, or culture *as* politic’. Scott Hames, ‘Narrating Devolution: Politics and/as Scottish Fiction’, *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st*

development; while the question of theory and its absence is determined by the underlying dominance of the national paradigm, there has not yet been an advent.

II *Shurely Shome Mishtake? Emily Apter's "Unhappy Scottishness"*

"I wouldn't have been reading English literature, because of the class barrier. Why would you want to read things that were treating you as an animal? The Scottish voice was equated with being working class".²⁷

In 2015 the Warwick Research Collective published *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, a call for a fresh theorisation of world literature on the basis of what it perceives as a renewed crisis of the Humanities.²⁸ Beginning by charting the production of theoretical movements in the 1980s – postcolonialism, ethnic and women's studies, cultural studies, poststructuralism, postmodernism and deconstruction among them – as stemming from a contemporaneous crisis in literary studies, WReC suggests that a similar reorientation is now overdue because (in an echo of the 'after theory' debates), 'the current moment is marked by the recognition that these "new formations" have themselves now passed their sell-by dates' (WReC, 3–4). Mobilising the economic theory of combined and uneven development, which emphasises that modernity is constructed by the co-existence of new capitalist formations alongside extant prior socio-economic relationships, their project is concerned with the 'literary registration and encoding of modernity as social logic' and follows Franco Moretti in conceiving of a world-capitalist system premised on inequality as the basis of a world literature (WReC, 15).

Their theory therefore advocates a displacement of what they term an 'idealist fantasy' of comparative literature as the "'level playing field'" described in *Death of a Discipline* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in favour of a politicised discussion of the discipline (Spivak 13, quoted in WReC, 22). In that respect

Century Writings, 5(2): 2 2017, 1–25 at 3.

²⁷ James Kelman, 'Intimidation, Provocation, Contempt – That's the Working Class Experience', Interview with Libby Brooks in *The Guardian*, 15.07.2016.

²⁸ WReC is a joint research collaboration. For *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature*, the collective comprises Sharae Deckard, Nicholas Lawrence, Neil Lazarus, Graeme Macdonald, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, Benita Parry, and Stephen Shapiro.

they take issue with Emily Apter's claims, from *The Translation Zone*, that comparative literature "was in principle global from its inception" and that the current globalisation of literary studies represents the ceding of national to comparative literatures (Apter, 41, quoted in WReC, 23; WReC, 24). Citing the anomaly represented by English literature within that formation, and critiquing as naïve her aspiration to "a paradigm of *translatio*" that stresses the importance of multilingualism 'against "national" particularism', they adduce in evidence the ongoing prevalence of Eurocentrist conceptions of multilingualism and indicate moreover that Apter's method of 'close reading with a worldview' is 'itself unconvincing [...] in its apparent assumption as to the ideological neutrality of critical method' (Apter, quoted in WReC, 25; WReC, 25–6). Developing insights from Lawrence Venuti and Louis-Jean Calvet, WReC argues instead that

[...] languages, literary forms and literary productions never enter the world on their own terms. A fundamental inequality – not intrinsic, but fully social – marks their capacities as representational practices; and this inequality is then overdetermined by the social logistics of translation, publication, reading, pedagogy, and so on. (WReC, 26)

In the following section, I will be particularising these objections with attention to the issues posed by Apter's 'close reading' of contemporary Scottish literature, focusing on my own reading of her argument in order to elucidate its guiding principles, the logic of linguistic Anglocentrism that underlies what she describes as the 'intralingual' translation of Scottish texts (Apter, 152), and the precise ways in which that reading demonstrates WReC's acknowledgement that translation 'is bound up with cultural misrepresentation, linguistic domination and social inequality' (WReC, 26).

The Translation Zone argues for a reconceptualisation of comparative literature through a developed translation studies. In a chapter entitled 'The Language of Damaged Experience', Apter attempts an analysis of contemporary Scottish literature to that end; labelling Iain Banks, James Kelman, Duncan McLean, and Irvine Welsh the 'New Scotologists', she utilises the theory of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno to suggest that the texts under discussion constitute a form of 'English to English' translation that reveals the condition of the Adornian 'withering human' exiled within the confines of a post-industrial nation (Apter, 152; 150). The first issue to emerge is, ironically, one

of language: describing their vernacular writing variously as ‘accent’; ‘idiom’; ‘language’; ‘vernacular’; ‘regional utterance’; ‘slang’; ‘subcultural *Sprache*’; ‘subcultural language’ (suggesting a difference from ‘language’ similar to the Saussureian distinction between *langue* and *parole*); and ‘prolespeak’, Apter exhibits a conceptual uncertainty over categorisation that reenters the thesis into the political subordination of periphery to centre she wishes to expose (Apter, 149–59). The first designation – accent – is especially interesting in that it links Anglophone but non-Standard English language to phonic expression and presents it as a variation inhering solely in orality, closer to a definition of vernacular as the everyday spoken language of the people rather than to the definition of vernacular as the European languages which emerged in written literary form from the usurpation of Latin by demotic languages, as, for example, in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. According to this formation, the characters who reside in these urban Scottish *demi-mondes* do so via a corporeal experience located in the eye and the ear; ‘[t]ypically,’ Apter writes, ‘how the narrators see the world is filtered through how the narrators speak the world, that is, through orally inflected interior monologue’ (Apter, 153). This is, however, also true of Standard English within a phonocentric conception of interior monologue, if denuded of its status as the ‘neutral’ and understood as ideological; the elision of awareness of that broader narratological strategy suggests that the particular character of phonocentrism on display here reveals itself as indicative of an underlying assumption of English as the Standard from which any Anglophone deviation is an enacted orality.

This logic of the ‘natural’ versus the Standard, wherein the former is unmediated, therefore construes non-Standard Anglophone language not as linguistic difference but as deviation, and the vernacular as an oral supplement to Standard English rather than a separate, parallel Anglophone signifying system. Though it might be expected to be the fundamental point of contestation in a debate on language and comparative literature in the Scottish context, the foundational principle of the argument, one which not only goes unquestioned by Apter but, indeed, is assumed as the basis of her reading, conceives vernacular writing in contemporary Scottish literature as a secondary and degraded deviation from a primary Standard English. By homogenising their aesthetic positions, vernacular differentiations, and literary history, Welsh, Kelman, Banks and McLean are constructed as a grouping who have ‘created a fashion for Scottish “minor literature”’ by inventing a contemporary idiom orthographically transposed into what

often seems to be another language, or at the very least a pseudo- or intralingual (English to English) translation' (Apter, 152), an assessment that is problematic in that it represents already-extant linguistic communities as a synthetic literary construct and identifies the vernacular as a translation from an *original* and preceding Standard. Such presumptions are evocative of the attitude identified by Kelman in satirising those who both elide his textual formalism and associate his writing with an unmediated and primary orality admitting access to an 'authentic' voice: 'It jist comes oot, ah says, it's the natchril rithm o the workin klass, ah jist opens ma mooth and oot it comes'.²⁹ Apter's argument paradoxically figures the author as both constructor and ventriloquist; a lack of understanding that these Scottish linguistic communities pre-exist their literature allows for the former position, while the phonocentric position necessitates the latter. It requires language to be at the same time both synthetic and natural, as well as directly evocative of the texture not only of lived experience, but of the body as the locus of that experience. Drawing on Adornian concepts (from *Minima Moralia*) of 'subjective damage' and the 'withering human' ([1951] Apter, 150), Apter conceives these contemporary Scottish texts as documents of a degraded being within a postcolonial context: the logical misstep within the argument is that, in order to link that conception to a discussion of language and translation, she conceives of their language as a constitutively degraded form of English, performative and even determinative of that diminished humanity.

A comparison might here be sketched with WReC, which also reads Kelman as an exemplar of social dissolution in a deindustrialised age. Its argument might *prima facie* appear close to Apter's in the way in which it interlinks language and the body via its analysis of *The Busconductor Hines*, particularly in the claim that 'the breakdown of his linguistic ability is better read as a psychosomatic registration, on one disintegrating body, of the effect of generalised top-down social violence' (WReC, 140). An important distinction is that WReC does not refer that linguistic collapse to an original standard, so that the complicity it perceives is rather between a disintegrating body and a formal instability of language that is referred to as modernist technique: unlike in Apter, where linguistic collapse is inferred to be a degradation from linguistic competency that finds analogy in the immediacy of the corporeal, WReC conceives the interrelation of social, corporeal and

²⁹ James Kelman, Afterword to *An Old Pub Near the Angel* (Edinburgh, 2007; 1973), 124.

linguistic fragmentation as explicitly and textually formalised. To theorise that subjective damage inheres in language is concerning because the claim that it carries such damage must rest on the assumption that language in Welsh, Kelman *et al.* is read as objectively damaged, and that its objective damage provides the basis for the claim. This is evidenced in the positing of ‘internal colonisation as a kind of linguistic depressant’ (Apter, 152): while it is commonplace to figure language as political and, furthermore, to suggest that it can both represent and encode a political status, the statement implies that the Scottish vernacular is formally depressed. While Apter argues that contemporary Scottish literature represents a political debasement that has a somatic effect on the lives of its characters, a prior assumption *regarding* language governs the logical extension of that debasement *to* language, such that a reading of Kelman, Welsh and McLean’s work as narratives of weakened bodies is preconditioned by the implication positing vernacular as a weakened English. Beyond debilitated, they furthermore are corrupted and offensive: Kelman’s bodies are placed linguistically and conceptually in proximity to what Apter terms his ‘linguistic splicing and deformities of utterance’ and compared in turn with McLean’s ‘equally abusive orality’ (Apter, 154). A preceding view of language clearly conditions this equation with the damaged body, and that subtext of deformity becomes explicit in the semantic field; this position emerges more overtly in the judgment that McLean’s prose ‘starts off relatively clean of Scottish burrs or swear words, but [...] becomes increasingly freighted with foul slang’ (*ibid.*). The conflation of ‘burr’ (note the recurrence of accent) and profanity is notable in itself, but also telling is the choice of the adjective ‘clean’. If Standard English – that which is free of ‘Scottish burrs’ – is clean, then what, by default, is Scottish vernacular?

Apter suggests an answer with her comparison of Kafka to Welsh’s ‘minoritarian English’, proposing that the latter allows the ‘animality’ of language to shine through (Apter, 155). One example is that of accent transliteration, in which is identified ‘the “goatiness” of the word “goat”, the Scots pronunciation of “got”’ (*ibid.*). Further to the confusion of dialect with Scots language and in addition to the rendering of vernacular as an issue of pronunciation, the misreading of the signifier is intensified due to the fact that the standard English ‘goat’ (the animal) and Scottish ‘goat’ are homonymic. That Apter co-identifies them is indicative of the priority within the argument of Standard English as the semiotic guarantor, and of the act of meaning-making as it is derived from that prioritised Standard. Herein, the

apparent semiotic link between the vernacular and animality ('goat' as 'goat') is in fact predication, rather than proof, of the guiding assumption that the vernacular is a crude derivation of official language and, by implication, that contemporary Scottish literature is derived from an official Standard. Developing the Adornian analysis of Cockney and East Berlin speech via the Benjaminian theory of 'crude thinking' as expressed in his evaluation of Brechtian dialect – 'the raw, prole, commonplace' (Apter, 150) – her position draws on Adorno's characterisation of a mutilated 'proletarian language', close to the body, in her reading of Scots, within which she identifies 'a harrowing, yet mesmerizing language of expletives and downbeat social realism – a "crude thought" lying in wait to feed its hunger on the defiles of standard language' (Apter, 152). Apter's Scottish vernacular is an incarnated word-made-flesh that 'pricks the reader into awareness of the deathliness of humanness, its proximity to meat or matter' (Apter, 155): figured as a tartan tartare, a corporeal idiom that embodies the bypassing of consciousness for soma, this is an 'animal' language, a 'raw immanence' (*ibid.*). The class politics that Apter mistakenly identifies in Welsh and others is less interesting than the one that resides in her own reading, in which the 'raw' is opposed to the 'clean'.

When seeming to praise Welsh's 'subcultural *Sprache*' and its 'effect of wounding Standard English with the slings and arrows of warped speech, at least for a Brit or Anglophone reader outside of Scotland' (Apter, 155), the argument not only returns to the oral but, via the paraphrase of Shakespeare, invokes the English doxa in describing its 'warped' nature. Most instructive is the simultaneous distancing and positioning around the 'Anglophone'; it suggests that Scottish literature is intuitively inaccessible by virtue of its language while at the same time making this claim pursuant on a critical misreading that derives from a position of assumed knowledge, by virtue of the casting of these texts as 'intralingual' translations. The argument position therefore hinges on an internal equivocation predicated upon the Anglophone, where vernacular is both already-known and radically exceptionalist, and is reliant on the latter being evaluated not on the principle of difference that governs language-to-language translation but as the interior warping of a standard. The association of 'Brit' with 'Standard English' in the context of a 'warped speech' underscores the presumption of the latter as both deviant and inferior, damaged by rather than damaging in relation to forces of imperial power. If Scottish literature is a matter of pronunciation, such a reading illuminates the question of world literature through the question posed by

the 'Anglophone' within it. Apter is correct in identifying a postcolonial politics adhering to these works, yet her own reading evinces a politics that inheres in the situation of Standard English as the normative (rather than the dominant) language of the British Isles and Ireland. This is especially misleading in relation to Kelman as it makes the vernacular the subject of his art, an assumption that steers misreadings of Kelman's work in general and neglects its philosophical and formalist investments. While Kelman begins from a presumption of linguistic legitimacy rather than making a claim to that legitimacy the subject of his writing, his work is yet often read as either constructing (rather than constituting) a politico-linguistic statement or, in putatively more sophisticated readings, as the performative and titillating gap between philosophy and enunciation. This remains critically underrecognised because vernacular is identified as form rather than as the semiotic system of a rigorous neomodernist aesthetic formalism, and is thereby elevated from form to subject. Kelman spurns this position before the fact when, in discussing *How late it was, how late*, he notes:

The gist of the argument amounts to the following, that vernaculars, patois, slangs, dialects, gutter-languages etc. [...] are inferior linguistic forms and have no place in literature. And a priori any writer who engages in the use of such so-called language is not really engaged in literature at all. It's common to find well-meaning critics suffering from the same burden, while they strive to be kind they still cannot bring themselves to operate within a literary perspective; not only do they approach the work as though it were an oral text, they somehow assume it to be a literal transcription of recorded speech.³⁰

At this juncture, the Apterian view – which asserts Kelman and Welsh as primarily political commentary – coincides with the national paradigm, which sacrifices the literary to the representational and the representative. Kelman's observation forms a critique of an imperialist perspective on the English language as it obscures the literariness of the non-Standard Anglophone in the context of world literature. By virtue of a privileging of the multilingual, this theory of world-literature marks non-'foreign' but non-Standard Anglophone literatures as a divergence that is simultaneously a degradation, their language

³⁰ From James Kelman, 'Elitist Slurs are Racism by Another Name', quoted in Christine Amanda Müller, *A Glasgow Voice: James Kelman's Literary Language* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2011), 9.

understood as synonymous with an essentially social content. Within this paradigm, the specific reading produced by the presumptions upon which the argument rests is that of the false equation of social degradation with linguistic degradation, the latter a medium of the former. The principle of difference cedes to similitude when treating of Scottish Anglophone literature, and a respect for heteronomy to a perspective wherein Anglophone vernacular is not viewed as autonomous but as a 'wounded' Standard. To compare vernacular writing to an intralingual translation process implies not only that Standard English is paradigmatically prior, with Scots vernacular the variant thereof, but also that the latter requires that translation to return it to a communal language. This in turn suggests not only an implied readership for Apter's text and its particular politics of translation ('Brit or Anglophone [...] outside of Scotland'), but for a theory of world literature as it is refracted by this singular reading of Scottish literature.

The principal misreading is compounded by localised ones that inscribe a hermeneutics of the text in which phonocentrism unites the oral and the aural to produce an extrinsic reading of language as immediate (if not immediately available, at least to the 'Brit' reader), while the transposition of the embodied everyday to the page evacuates the literary from Scottish literature within a world-literature context as it is also evacuated through the national paradigm in Scottish literary studies. Such a sentiment is evident when Apter writes that 'Welsh [...] lends a new ear to "damaged life" as the aural incision of capitalism on experience' (Apter, 156), a formulation that accentuates the stated postcolonial perspective on vernacular as a *wounding* of English to recast it as a *wounded* English. While a critique of capitalism is central to his texts (in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, for example, 'the scheme was a concentration camp for the poor'),³¹ Apter suggests that capitalism is immanent to the language because it is itself damaged or incised by the system. To suggest that it is immanent to the language is to suggest that language is the expression of that degradation, therefore constituting a 'fall' from the Standard English which presumably, if following this logic, is the manifestation of the favour of the system. This relation of experience to an English Standard leads to some of the most problematic claims of the piece, such as in the following excerpt, a quotation from the scene in *Trainspotting* (in which Sick Boy toys with Asian tourists) followed by an analysis thereof:

³¹ Irvine Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (London and New York, 1997; 1995), 22.

– Can I help you? Where are you headed? ah ask. *Good old-fashioned Scottish hoshpitality, aye, ye cannae beat it, shays the young Sean Connery, the new Bond, cause girls, this is the new bondage ...* (T, 29)

The “Sh” sound signifies unhappy Scottishness. It may be read as a verbal tic of class resentment – smarmy, sarcastic and malevolent – erupting violently inside the words “hoshpitality,” and “pish.” The fear of impotence swirls through Sick Boy’s speech; even the evocation of Scotland’s only genuine action hero, James Bond, spirals self-defeatingly out of control in the form of a pun on girls in bondage. (Apter, 158)

Ironically, given her insistence on voice, Apter misses the clear cultural reference here: the ‘sh’ that she extrapolates into the ‘unhappy Scottishness’ of Simon is an impersonation of the famous Sean Connery accent and belongs in fact to Bond (“Scotland’s only genuine action hero”), rather than being a postcolonial Tourettes – a ‘verbal tic of class resentment’ – proper to Sick Boy. That political misinterpretation is effected by linguistic misinterpretation becomes exacerbated by a further interpretative error: the statement that ‘[i]n simplest terms, the dole-and-dope social formation [of *Trainspotting*] characterized as “wanked by wankers” is converted via language politics into “wanking the wankers” on a world stage’, a declaration emblematic of the prior misreading that leads Apter to the conclusion that Welsh is ‘capitalising’ exploitation by commodifying it (Apter, 158). ‘Wanked by wankers’ is a mistaken paraphrase of the famous speech by Renton, in which he professes that he hates the Scots rather than the English: whereas the English are ‘just wankers’, the Scots are ‘colonised by wankers’.³² Apter transposes noun as verb, producing a logical fallacy that shows a misunderstanding of the linguistic term and thus the underlying point, namely that Scots are servile to the coloniser; her reading suggests that the colonised are being serviced by the coloniser (“wanked by wankers”) who is thus servile to the servant, and then that the colonised are servile to the master (“wanking the wankers”), a formula that cannot therefore represent a subversive exploitation.

This signals the wider significance of referring Scottish linguistic communities (or Hiberno-English, Northern, or any other non-Standard English Anglophone vernacular of the British Isles and Republic of Ireland) to Standard English, and evidences at the same time an issue therein whereby the plurality of world-literature is subverted by the homogenising of the

³² Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London and New York, 1997; 1993), 78.

Anglophone within it. It indicates a concomitant need to consider the Anglophone literatures of what is presently the United Kingdom and Ireland within a world-literary framework which could be mutually reflective for the development of an understanding both of the complexity of the Anglophone as refracted through that lens, and for world literature developed through a consideration of that Anglophone context. World literary studies requires attention to these forms of Anglophone difference, and Scottish literature can be significant to the field in this regard; while Apter's reading illustrates one of the spaces into which further work in world literature is required, it also demonstrates the need for Scottish literary studies to shift from the national literary dominant to an intrinsic literary paradigm to be able to understand and represent its own position among this field, and to situate itself therein in order to contribute to a theory of world literature. Discussing national literary history, Thomson evinces wariness that '[t]he comparative solution to which we are directed by advocates of "theory" compounds the problem, [...] projecting an ideal horizon within which the deficiencies and partialities of literary histories are redeemed' (Thomson, 15). My reading points to a specific inequality that exposes the 'fantasy' of an ideal horizon as denounced by both Thomson and WReC, while suggesting at the same time that a reading of Scottish literature within a theory of world literature might offer avenues away from the national dominant towards the literary. If Scottish Literature has belatedly attempted to open itself to theory, this belatedness accords us an opportunity to think against the grain of dominant temporality in a way that also pertains to questions in world literature. If disciplinary formation can be traced by the belatedness of theory, so too does a late coming to theory afford a prospect for disciplinary divergence.

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