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Introduction: Scottish and Irish Literature, Before and After Theory

Matthew Wickman

The topic of this issue was born in 2014 at the International Congress of Scottish Literatures conference held in Glasgow, where several of the essays in this issue made their debut. The organisers of that event asked me to convene one or two panels pertaining to some aspect of Scottish literature relative to theory. A single panel, it seemed, wouldn't be adequate. For one thing, it raised the question of whether it made more sense to think in terms of 'theory' as a (nominally) unified discipline – which it is not – or 'theories' as an eclectic range of ideas, formulated in the wake (or, perhaps, the ashes) of such influential thinkers as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger and taking forms ranging from recognisable schools of thought (e.g., deconstruction, feminism, postcolonialism, queer theory, media theory, etc.) to those that are more emergent, and in some cases ephemeral (e.g., affect theory, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, posthumanism and more). Additionally, Scottish literature bears a complex relation to theory, emerging as a field during an era when theory also ascended to prominence in the academy.¹ While scholars of Scottish literature may or may not have had much to say about their own field relative to theory, there was something implicitly or proximately theoretical about Scottish literature inasmuch as the latter arose in part as a critique of English Literature as a hegemonic field and not simply as the canonical works of a particular nation. Theory, we might say, was always – always already – the 'political unconscious' of ScotLit.

So, 'theory' or 'theories'? And 'Scottish Literature *and* ...' or 'Scottish Literature *as* ...'? These were the questions that leapt to mind when I was asked to convene a panel for the conference. Wanting to draw upon the richness of the field and also position it relative to theory's own uneven history – its own balky hegemony and perceived 'crisis' – the organisers and I decided to arrange for two panels: 'Before Theory' and 'After Theory.' On

¹ See my essay 'The Emergence of Scottish Studies' in *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*, eds. Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney (Cambridge, 2012), 248–60.

the first panel, Cairns Craig, Murray Pittock and Alex Thomson discussed intellectual formations and ideas from the Scottish past that had made their way, mostly unrecognised, into modern thought. On the ‘After Theory’ panel, Scott Hames, Carla Sassi and Maria-Daniella Dick reflected on the relationship of Scottish Literature as a field to a wide set of intellectual formations, and to the disposition of scholars in the field to engage theory in some meaningful way – or, perhaps, to fail to engage it. Four of those six presenters have written essays for this volume, whether elaborating on ideas they originally presented at the conference or crafting new essays – a set of new thoughts five years on. Given the broader focus of the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, it made additional sense to widen the discussion to include Irish Literature, which has its own important and powerful stories to tell relative to theory/theories.

Below, I will introduce, briefly, each of the individual essays and reflect on what it means to think about Irish and Scottish Literature together alongside theory. But first, given the impetus of this issue and stemming from my own area of specialisation, let me elaborate further on why Scotland’s case relative to theory is a potentially compelling one. I return here to two groups of questions that underwrote the panels at the 2014 conference, each a combination of situation and ontology. First, where is the field of Scottish literary studies relative to major trends in modern thought – and, hence, *what is* the field of Scottish literary studies? And second, where is theory, today, some thirty-five years after the peak of deconstruction in the mid-1980s (when theory exerted perhaps its most forceful impact on literary studies)—and, hence, *what is* theory? And what can Scottish literary studies tell us, if anything, about the state of theory?

A 2007 issue of the *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, titled ‘Theory and Scottish Exceptionalism’, brought attention to questions like these. The issue’s editors, Eleanor Bell and Scott Hames, acknowledged that theory had permeated literary studies but they also wondered why ‘criticism of Scottish literature [had traditionally] largely ignored theory’. That assertion is questionable, to be sure, but their reasoning touched on an important issue. Scottish criticism had dodged theory, supposedly, for ‘ideological’ reasons. If there is to be a discrete or independent Scotland, there must also be a discrete field of Scottish literature. And, Bell and Hames observed, the ‘side-stepping [of] 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'.² Certain branches of theory, after all, particularly those preceding the cultural studies turn of the 1980s, tend to cast national identities as epiphenomena of broader categories, whether of language, cognition, affect, media, technology, climatic forces, aesthetic forms, performative gestures, mathematical and object-oriented ontologies, actor-network configurations or many others, not to mention categories like race, class and gender, which are usually attached to questions of social justice. Even theories of nationalism (think of the Benedict Anderson's famed appeal to 'imagined communities') are credos about nationalisms generally, and not about nationhood in distinct contexts.

A *Scottish* literature and a *Scottish* criticism thus purchased their identity, Bell and Hames argued, at the price of their wider intellectual and even political relevance: '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, [Scottish literary studies] 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'.³ Hence, they argued, to undertake work in a carefully delineated field of Scottish literature is to engage in an intellectual act of self-imposed exile, with Scotland becoming, once again, as in a Walter Scott novel, a *locus amoenus* of modern romance, untouched in some ways by the theoretical forces that had confounded the national borders of other literary traditions. By extension, then, the theoretical engagement of Scottish literature was tantamount to a political act less of 'union' (of national literatures under the broad banner of 'English', say) than of a forced, frank reckoning with a wider set of intellectual and disciplinary realities. In this scenario, to grant theory 'permanent leave to remain' in Scottish literary studies would be to compel the field to define itself not only relative to Scotland, but also to the vaster world of literary studies generally.

Bell and Hames would pursue this line of thought into other venues, Bell in her edited volume *Scotland in Theory* and her monograph *Questioning*

² "Editorial: Theory and Scottish Exceptionalism," *International Journal of Scottish Literature* 3 (2007): <http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue3/editorial.htm>. Accessed April 29, 2019.

³ Ibid.

Scotland and Hames in edited volumes like *Unstated* and in a series of articles and symposia.⁴ As one would expect, aspects of these arguments have met with some pushback – notably, in my view, from Cairns Craig, a contributor to this volume. Craig’s book *Out of History*, published in 1996 but circulating as an argument in the field for several years prior to that, made an exemplary ‘exceptionalist’ case for Scottish literature as a tradition of fantastical, *outré*, avant-garde and alternative histories that had long presented an important counter-image to the English literary tradition of realism. (The broader Western tradition of realism – better said, of ‘representations of reality’ in literature – famously culminates for Erich Auerbach with Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, an English novel set in the Scottish Hebrides.⁵) Over the past couple of decades, however, in a series of books and articles, Craig has been making a very different argument about Scotland’s literary and intellectual history, less exceptionalist than formative, even foundationalist in its contribution to modern thought and expression (and by way of genres and even disciplines).⁶ In his paper on the ‘Before Theory’ panel at the 2014 conference, Craig invoked the vital place of Scottish intellectual history within the very theoretical traditions that now would save Scottish criticism from itself. Specifically, and as a critique of the kind of argument made by Bell and Hames, he argued for the place of Hume and subsequent generations of Scottish Idealists in the work of Gilles Deleuze.⁷

Irish literature has always hovered in the background of Scottish literary studies as a kind of icon of what Scottish literature might be (or, perhaps, might have been) did it not cast its exceptionalist glow. One thinks, for example, of Tom Nairn’s landmark 1977 book *The Break-Up of Britain*, which made a special–exceptionalist – place for Scotland inasmuch as the nation, Nairn

⁴ See Bell and Gavin Miller, *Scotland in Theory: Reflection on Culture and Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004); Bell, *Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, Postmodernism* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2004); Hames, *The Edinburgh Companion to James Kelman* (Edinburgh, 2010), esp. pp. 1–4; cf. Hames, “Scottish Literature, Devolution, and the Fetish of Representation,” *The Bottle Imp* Supplement Issue 1 (2014): <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/SWE/TBI/TBISup/TBISup1/Hames.html>. Accessed April 29, 2019.

⁵ See Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), 525–53.

⁶ Of many examples, see, in particular, *Intending Scotland: Explorations of Scottish Culture since the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2009) and *The Wealth of the Nation: Scotland, Culture and Independence* (Edinburgh, 2018).

⁷ For his critique of Bell’s *Questioning Scotland* in particular, see Craig, *Intending Scotland*, 55–60.

contended, was at once too early and too late for a politically nationalist self-consciousness. An early participant in the British empire, Scotland's political development had been suppressed by the comparative wealth the nation enjoyed throughout the nineteenth century. Ireland, meanwhile, victimized by oppression in more obvious ways, had sharpened its identity in opposition to 'Britain' and 'empire' alike.⁸ If Scotland was, for nearly two centuries, a 'stateless nation', Ireland was the quintessential alternative to Britain within the British Isles. Hence, there has seemed to be a reasonably comfortable fit (if by no means univocal harmony) between Irish studies and postcolonial theory, even as early as the 1990s.⁹ What is more, prominent theorists like Jacques Derrida had long been drawn to Irish literature through the influence of such Irish writers as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett.¹⁰ Hence, while some of the most important cultural evaluations of Irish literature are not exactly theoretical (I am thinking, for example, of Declan Kiberd's bookend tomes *Inventing Ireland* [1997] and *After Ireland* [2018]), the relationship between Ireland and theory has not seemed problematic *as such* – no more than theory, itself, is deemed problematic.

That last point requires particular attention, for theory is hardly a stable category. In fact, it has been a subject of much debate across the academy – and within and outwith theoretical circles. I am not speaking here of the 'theoretical turn' of the 1970s and '80s and the reactionary counterturn to theory, as those debates seem well behind us. Instead, it seems a useful exercise simply to ask what theory even means as we approach the third decade of the new millennium. From a disciplinary standpoint, theory seems more eclectic today than in the '80s, when it functioned, Bell and Hames observe, as an instrument in the 'renovation of English'. I alluded to some of that eclecticism above in listing the varieties of theoretical experience; and the perusal of any number of theory journals today reveals less any sense of systematic coherence of approach or school of thought than a diversity of models reflected against a wide array of topics and levied against each other: Badiou's mathematical ontology against the French phenomenologies and post-structuralisms that grew out of Heidegger's philosophy; Latour's Actor

⁸ See Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (Altona Vic: Common Ground, 2003), esp. chapter 5: "Northern Ireland: Relic or Portent?"

⁹ See the special issue 'Irish Studies and Postcolonial Theory' edited by Colin Graham and Willy Maley, *Irish Studies Review* 7.2 (1999).

¹⁰ In particular, see Derrida, *Ulysses Gramophone: Deux Mots Pour Joyce* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).

Network Theory against the sociological criticism of Pierre Bourdieu and the affect of ‘critique’ itself; object-oriented ontology alongside but also against speculative realism; theories of cognition supplementing new formalisms, and theories of affect set against each; and so on, and so on. And this is true not only of articles and books alongside each other, but also, at times, of successive paragraphs within a particular piece.

Aside from the concept of what theory is, questions concerning the state of theory are also highly nuanced from an institutional perspective. Drawing upon the work of John Guillory, J.E. Elliott argues that ‘what rescued the English department from the kind of curricular marginalization experienced by classics and, more recently, German studies, was the politicization of curriculum and an institutional monopoly on writing instruction. Although ostensibly committed to critical literacy and the cultivation of public intellectuals, a post-formalist attention to social justice has arguably been more about the creation of organizational solidarity and the recreation of a major suitable to massified enrollment’.¹¹ Deconstruction, in this scenario, weaned scholars and students off the classics, and off philology, by turning attention to ‘texts’ and the universality of interpretation, but only at the cost of eventually displacing attention from theory’s own intellectual history in the critiques of scientism and high philosophy. ‘[T]his revised role for thought, both performative and indeterminate, eviscerates what is conventionally understood as “normal” scholarship or science. Deconstruction might have inspired a readings industry, but it was curiously uninterested in problem solving. It was little more concerned with what might be called conceptual instrumentation’, claiming for itself, yes, an exceptionalist position within the academy that parallels the propensities of distinctively *Scottish* literary and critical studies.¹² Scholars of Scottish literary studies may never have been more theoretical than when they appeared to refuse theory.

So, what does that mean, in practice, for the way we imagine Scottish literature and theory together or separately – which means, apparently, when we imagine them together or... together? And what happens when we think about them in conjunction with Irish literature? Given where theory is – and where Scottish and Irish literatures are as fields – there can be no simple, single answer. But this special issue of the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* provides a representative sampling of perspectives onto these

¹¹ J. E. Elliott, “The Social Structure of English in the Text of Theory,” *New Literary History* 44:3 (2013): 425–47 at 429.

¹² *Ibid.*, 435.

questions. Our lead essay is by Cairns Craig, who explores a fascinating but largely unknown chapter in the development of theory in the form of Herbert J. C. Grierson's two-volume, 1912 edition of John Donne's poetry. At the time, Grierson was Professor of English Literature at the University of Aberdeen; he would become the Knight Professor of English Literature at the University of Edinburgh three years after the publication of his edition of Donne. That edition, especially Grierson's extensive scholarly introduction, presented Donne to readers as an eminently modern poet – an argument that would exert a profound impact on T. S. Eliot and, from there, on Cleanth Brooks and a generation of New Critics. Given the importance of the New Criticism to the textual focus (even fixation) of several schools of theory that followed (especially deconstruction, which for a long time in America was virtually synonymous with 'theory' itself), Grierson's textual criticism may be seen as foundational – at the very least, as prescient – of modern thought in the latter half of the twentieth century. Eóin Flannery also takes up the prehistory of modern thought, in this case by way of a historical examination of Roger Casement, 'the Irish humanitarian pioneer and revolutionary nationalist'. Casement's early twentieth-century reports on the Congo, highly critical of the rule of Leopold II of Belgium, reveal strikingly modern sensibilities; in modern parlance, Casement's reports bring postcolonial theory into conversation with ecocriticism. Casement's history thus foreshadows a trajectory of thought that has become vital in our modern world. In Flannery's estimation, it amounts to a 'commitment to indigenous human rights and environmental justice', a brand of theory 'currently trading as postcolonial ecocriticism'.

With Jen Keating's essay we take up topics that have emerged 'after theory', or in the wake of theory's golden age. Consistently with the tenor of so much theory, which generally remains more invested in assessing the present for the purpose of projecting a future than in transmitting a cultural heritage (which is generally the work of literary studies), Keating surveys the contemporary art scene with the aim of creating a roadmap for the way forward. Theories of nationalism, so important to Irish studies traditionally, present a roadblock for such a project. What might it mean, instead, to fashion a future on the basis of 'aesthetic exploration'? Maria-Daniella Dick pursues a similarly revisionist, post-nationalist tenor of thought, albeit by way of a different topic. For Dick, the very notion that we might be living in an era 'after theory' is contradictory to the degree that it is theory that enables us to formulate such a proposition in the first place. As she sees it, this then

poses a challenge to the field of Scottish literature, which must become more self-consciously theoretical if it is to exist at all. But for Dick, the field's belatedness in reconciling itself to theory offers a way to critically engage emergent fields like world literature, and to undercut the latter's Anglophonic tendencies. And yet, as Alex Thomson argues in his essay, such engagement would require scholars of Scottish literature to conceptualise key tensions that inform the field, particularly the 'methodological nationalism' that perpetually, terminologically defines it. Invoking the spirit of Wai Chee Dimock, Gianni Vattimo and others, Thomson employs 'weak theory' – in contradistinction to 'critical theory' – as a way to navigate between ethical and aesthetic modes of critique while restoring a kind of moral force to criticism that engages literary texts as singular and local.

Thomson's appeal to weak theory accords well with a distinction Carla Sassi draws between 'Theory' and 'theory'. Sassi's balanced, generous assessment of Scottish literature's vexed relationship with theory is worth quoting here at length:

Shaped as a disciplinary field in its own right between the 1970s and 1990s, at the height of Theory, Scottish studies developed very much in tension, not to say in open antagonism, with any universalising methodology. Its notorious resistance against homogenising paradigms and its focus on local/national 'uniqueness' and 'exceptionality' suggested a picture of nativist isolation that was in sharp contrast with the cosmopolitan *esprit du temps*. If such insistence on a locally rooted and factual approach, focused on defining Scottish literature as an 'authentic' expression of the Scottish nation, can be seen with the benefit of hindsight as a justifiably defensive stance in the early phases of a vexed disciplinary history, it nonetheless generated a rift between Scottish studies specialists and mainstream scholars who considered their work as 'universal' and not bound to any particular society or culture.

For Sassi, this represents a beginning rather than an end point for Scottish literary studies, as she traces important developments in the field since the irruption of theory into Scottish studies in the 1990s. She moves here from an exploration of cosmopolitanism, long a pressing topic in the field, to an ethics oriented toward the 'stranger', exploring a range of literary texts that illustrate what theory is coming to mean (both consciously and unconsciously)

to scholars of Scottish literature.

Sassi's essay points not only to directions within Scottish literature, but also to contributions the field has to make to other fields adjacent to it, including theory. Irish literature has long been recognised for such contributions, of course, and the essays in this volume by Eóin Flannery and Jen Keating illustrate why. But Scottish literature also has much to offer – whether to friends or 'strangers'.

The volume's concluding piece, a review essay by Cairns Craig, makes this point with particular force. The volume he reviews, *Literature and Union: Scottish Texts, British Contexts*, edited by Colin Kidd and Gerard Carruthers, argues against Scottish 'essentialism', long considered as a reflex of a nationally-focussed criticism, and thus a perpetual point of concern for Scottish literature (as the essays by Maria-Daniella Dick and Alex Thomson underscore). Kidd and Carruthers thus argue for the 'interdependence' (rather than the "independence") of Scottish literary studies. But Craig asks whether this criticism really bears with any force on Scottish literature or whether, to the contrary, the idea of Scottish insularity has become something of a working myth in the field, a straw man against which to take a more 'enlightened', cosmopolitan position. As this is a historical as well as a conceptual question, this is an important essay with which to conclude the volume – a volume that poses questions of what these fields, Scottish and Irish literatures, mean relative both to history and the history of ideas as we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century.

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