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“WHERE STAND WE NOW?”:
A RENAISSANCE VIEW

R. D. S. Jack

Discriminating

*The fairest branch that rises from the root of reason is discrimination. This problem was widely discussed, especially in the Thomist and Scholastic schools.*

Martin Heidegger.¹

In what was expected to be the final volume of *Studies in Scottish Literature*, I looked back to Tom Scott’s “Observations on Scottish Studies,” published in the journal’s first issue. There I confined myself to re-evaluating Scottish Literature’s linguistic boundaries from a medieval and renaissance perspective.² The journal having resurrected itself, it seems appropriate to develop those arguments and widen the range of reference.

One of Scott’s major concerns supports this belief. While welcoming a new dawn in Scottish Studies he rightly focused on the 17th Century. “Little is known about this period in literature, and diligent research might produce a very different picture from the current use,” he commented.³ That was, at the time, a fair assessment as a predominantly inward-looking, nationalistic approach did little service to the artificial, European bias of early literature.

I began studying for a PhD within that lost period in 1964. The origins of my interest in the Renaissance Scottish sonnet and European poetry along with the length of my subsequent involvement in the discipline

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encouraged me to offer a generally positive keynote address entitled “Striking a Comparatively Positive Note” to the seventy-five delegates from eleven countries attending the Conference of Scottish Medieval and Renaissance Studies in Padova last year. In it I highlighted the advances made in this area from the early contributions of John MacQueen, Matthew MacDiarmid, Priscilla Bawcutt and Helena Shire onwards. That I was facing so many delegates from a wide range of countries indicates that the process urged by Scott is now well under way. From Italy alone, there is Alessandra Petrina’s scholarly work on Machiavelli and William Fowler, as well as the *Alba Literaria* of Marco Fazzini.4

It was because so many of Scott’s hopes had been realized that I offered a mainly positive account of criticism within the period defined by the Conference. For the same reasons I have felt able to widen the audience of that address to include specialists in the Enlightenment and later periods.

And an understanding of the past is particularly important for minority literatures. In the Scottish case the creative and critical movements which initiated a revival of interest in national writers in the 1950s and early 1960s were understandably defensive. This was because the place of Scottish authors within the nation’s education system had reached a nadir. My school and university education coincided with that period. From 1954 until 1964, within the Scottish educational heartland of Ayr Academy and Glasgow University, I was given an excellent introduction to the English Literary Tradition as defined by F.R. Leavis. But of Scottish authors only Burns featured at school, and only Burns and Scott in the Glasgow honours lecture course.

As the section heading suggests, this essay will highlight the value of discrimination. As a personal vision of the state of Scottish Literature then and now it is particularly important I define my own perspective at each stage. Here, this means distinguishing between what was in the curriculum and what was not. Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Dickens loomed large and remain enthusiasms for me but it was a consciousness that Scottish literature had been sidelined that led me to choose a Scottish thesis topic.

To explain how a revival of interest in Scottish literature could coincide with the downplaying of long periods within it, one must turn to the most influential critical work of the day, Kurt Wittig’s *Scottish Tradition in Literature* (1958). Wittig carefully explained that his chosen methodology was an interim stratagem designed to counterbalance the excess of English influence: “In Scotland, a different set of traditions has

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created a society which in many respects (though not all) is very different from that which exists in England . . . I have picked out the ones which seem to me specifically Scottish and ignored the rest.5 Nonetheless, his method effectively overwrote the pluralistic, antiquarian and philological scholarship of the past with four synchronically defined principles of Anti-Englishness –writing in Scots, unpretentiously, on Scottish themes from a radical political viewpoint.

That the most recent – Edinburgh – History of Scottish Literature accepts the limitations of these criteria using my own counter-argument as its logic for the change is pleasing but not the point. 6 The crux is opposition coming from a specialist in that Scottish Renaissance whose entire existence was questioned by Wittig, by earlier historians and by the leading poet of the day, Hugh MacDiarmid.

So where do we stand now and how does that affect the way I present my view? The nature of the “trivial” humanities is such that changes tend to be cyclical rather than linear. My education in the 1950s and ’60s followed Eliot’s maxim that the critic was midwife to a text which was itself the proper focus of analysis. What followed was the raising of theory from midwife’s assistant to queen of all she surveyed. Now she has abdicated and a more balanced relationship between analysis and theory pertains.

As we are all conditioned by our early training, my own preferences remain textually focused. For me the positive value of adapting pedagogically to the theoretical movement was acceptance of critical pluralism. I am not, therefore, claiming that my approach is anything other than one way of approaching the evidence. This I see as the liberating side of the theoretical revolution and the relativism it encouraged. The negative potential of that movement lies with the critical works of that period which started with their conclusions. It is easy to elect one set of premises and then force the textual evidence to conform but the practice is at odds with both past criticism and the open principles of the theoretical period itself.

In that open spirit, I offer instead an overtly diachronic, textually focused, view of the current state of Scottish Literature, using the older, chronological terminology of “Early, Medieval and Renaissance” as these are in harmony with the diachronic approach. Like all convenient titles, they are blunt tools and so have to be carefully defined and their limitations acknowledged. In Italy the movement from Middle Ages to Renaissance was sudden and clear. When at last the Renaissance reached

Scotland, that movement had slowed markedly. Is Henryson or Dunbar a medieval or a renaissance poet? I nonetheless prefer it to labeling the Renaissance “Early Modern.” First, which author is not “modern” when he or she writes? Second, “Early Modern” is a loaded term, implicitly isolating and diminishing the “Middle Ages” as either “not modern” or “a transition to better things.” Yet the Scholastic training of so many leading lights in the age of theory led them to draw on those “dark” ages for inspiration. Discrimination in this terminological context means remembering the sub-title of this section. Heidegger was not alone among modern theorists in finding modernity especially in medievalism and the Christian Humanist tradition – Derrida, Barthes and Eco also looked back to move forward.

There is a specifically Scottish footnote to this argument. For most nations and languages, “Renaissance” signs a positive age. In England, it signs the Golden Age of Shakespeare, celebrating the dominance of English writers as masters of artifice within a European movement. Replace that optimism with a spirit of defensive nationalism and the greatness of Tudor culture becomes instead a threat to Scottishness. Introduce modern criteria for Scottishness drawn from non-literary disciplines and artifice becomes pretentiousness, “courtly” becomes elitist and the Scottish Renaissance effectively disappears in sophistic embarrassment. That this crude vision still exists can be proved empirically. For most people a conference entitled “The Scottish Renaissance” still means the modern Renaissance led by Hugh MacDiarmid – himself one of the most belligerent denigrators of its chronological rival for the name. But “The Case is Altered” now. There has been real progress in our understanding of that period since Tom Scott’s pessimistic review.

I have also, intentionally, used the sub-title to J.M. Barrie’s The Admirable Crichton to conclude this part of the argument as the next section will re-examine the current achievements and limitations of research in the early period as a prelude to examining how those changes impact upon our understanding of later authors.
Mythologizing I: From “Dark Ages” to “Lost Renaissance”?

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically; it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately admissible.

Barthes.\(^7\)

The first simplification to be addressed is that which defines Scots as the national language of Scotland and so dates the origins of Scottish Literature in the late 14\(^{th}\) century with Barbour’s Bruce. The case for and against this nationalistic view of language is intelligently assessed by Jacques Roubaud in “The Voice of Poetry.”\(^8\) Arguing from a wide variety of minority languages, he accepts that it is natural for those who speak them to seek a single language as a clear, defensive sign of a unique identity – “If you are a nationalist there is one nation and one language.”\(^9\) Unfortunately, that postpones the starting date of the vernacular canon until a nation recognizably exists, in this case until Barbour’s Bruce. Bruce is king of a united Scotland rather than competitive tribes. Roubaud’s second argument concerns the voice of poetry specifically. But poetry is the earliest literary mode, and when he argues that it must be valued on its own terms, not pre-defined politically, he offers eloquent support to the polymathic extension of “original” enquiry into earlier days.

I have argued this case before and so will cover this exercise in de-mythologising briefly.\(^10\) As early as 700 AD Scottish voices could be heard in Hibernic Latin (Adamnan’s Vitae Columba), in Welsh Gaelic (Y Gododdin) and in Old English (The Dream of the Rood). Add Pictish Runes and, in the 13th century, the Anglo-Norman Fergus as well as evidence of episodes from the Old Norse Karlamagnuśsaga being recited in Scots and the linguistic range of our heritage is revealed.

The implications of this expansion in time and language for future histories of Scottish literature are, however, problematic. The first volume of the earlier Aberdeen History may have given shorter shrift to Gaelic and Latin, but it covered the major Anglo-Scottish canon more thoroughly. The complete omission of arguably the most original,

\(^7\) Roland Barthes, Mythologies (London, 1984), 183.
\(^9\) Roubaud, p. 12.
imaginative prose writer of the 17th century, Sir Thomas Urquhart, is only the most obvious gap in a volume doomed by its own criteria to cover a thousand years while offering all “Scottish” languages equal attention.

The second area of concern moves from the “Scots” language to the loss of dialectical nicety which Barthes explicitly identified with synchronism and mythic logic. There is no doubt that Aristotelian rhetoric and dialectic constituted the original grounding for literary criticism throughout Western Europe until the late Renaissance. That the tradition of “Rhetoric and Belles Lettres” endured for an especially long time in Scotland has been convincingly argued by Robert Crawford.11 That it lasted longer in Scotland than in England I can also assert from personal experience. The first “Highers” paper I sat in 1963 tested knowledge of rhetoric and practical criticism. Literary questions only appeared in the second. In England at this time a different division between A-level Language and A-level Literature existed.

If the basic principles of Aristotelian Rhetoric were still dominant in my own day that grounding also offered an idea of what distinguished the arts of imaginative persuasion from other disciplines. That difference began with the nature of the trivium: “It is clear that that rhetoric . . . like dialectic . . . is not bound up with a single, definite class of subjects [its] function is not simply to succeed in persuasion but rather to observe the persuasive methods in each case.”12 Within these parameters, Aristotle also distinguished clearly between the political function of poetry and the fullest potential persuasive range open to a discipline that crossed disciplines and might explore all allegorical levels potentially rather than actually. In that context, Aristotle’s view of those who confined themselves to the political or lower tropological area of concern is withering: “It would be strange to think that the art of politics or practical wisdom is the best knowledge since man is not the best in the world.”13

That one could not, within one’s own discipline, tell good writing from bad and so had to seek justification of one’s existence by beginning with theory rather than text, with outside disciplines (which often you had not studied) was not contemplated. And it was these earlier principles that were followed by Scottish authors from the earliest medieval writers via Burns to Barrie.

This side of the critical equation is well supported by leading scholars in the Scottish medieval and renaissance period. Despite this, many writers still begin their studies of Scottish Literature with the classical heritage alone. That one could leap from Longinus to Philip Sidney

13 Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics VI.7, p.1801.
without missing anything was the accepted view in the mid twentieth century. J. W. H. Atkins, for example, claimed that, “There was an absence of clear ideas concerning the nature of poetry in particular, its aims and standards.”\(^1\) In 1975, W.K. Wimsatt held the same view: “[the medieval period] was an age of theological thinking,” he wrote. “Such a society does not characteristically promote the essentially humanistic activity of literary criticism.”\(^2\) But vagueness is the last thing you’d expect from the super-refinement of Scholastic argument as the major studies of Richard Southern (historically/ philosophically) and Etienne Gilson (theologically) have established.\(^3\)

Building on this evidence Alastair Minnis provided the textual evidence necessary to substantiate the opposed claim that “we must cease regarding scholasticism as a malevolent tide which caused the submergence of literary awareness” since “it can be argued that it actually channelled such awareness into areas of study where it was enabled to enjoy new prestige.” He goes on to argue that the basic principles of Christian Humanism governed literary criticism throughout Western Europe from Boethius and the Medieval Commentators until the 18\(^{th}\) century at the earliest.\(^4\)

Gilson has offered an excellent account of the major premises distinguishing Christian Humanism and his argument is essential reading. Crucially, however, worship of a Christian god who contains all being within him and also who cares for individual souls yet exists mysteriously within an inexplicable harmony differs markedly from both Platonic and Aristotelian gods. They did discuss the idea but as their gods were defined as external to the world they created and found their perfection in the order of good and of being respectively the different premises from which Christian Humanism begins are evident enough.

The Christian opposition between metaphysical perfection and human darkness is crucial to an understanding of why the doubting, deconstructing, hyper-intellectual modern theoretical movement shared many ideas with a period of faith. Yes, a quintuple harmony transcends and unites the Christian world but it offers answers only beyond human comprehension after death. That so many of the new theorists had studied

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the Scholastic method is, therefore, no coincidence. Nor are the many books and articles developing all three lines of research. In this introductory context I have confined myself to basic evidence. But the subtlety of the Christian Humanist commentators is now an established area of research. That the Scottish contribution to these discussions is practically non-existent is one of the major “cautelis” to be observed in the future.

The relating of early Scottish Literature to the wider theoretical picture is an important topic for those whose studies effectively begin with enlightenment principles. Even the more conservative critics have guidance to give. But how many “Enlightenment” studies take into account Priscilla Bawcutt’s study of Gavin Douglas or Robert Kindrick’s *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric*?¹⁹ Yet these early monographs do take into account the Christian Humanist heritage as embodied in the “moralising” tradition.

That many still follow the unreconstructed, nationalist line is understandable, however. As noted, Wittig was not a lone voice urging the nationalist cause. The major literary history at the turn of the 20th century was T. F. Henderson’s *Scottish Vernacular Literature*. In 1900 he claimed that Scottish vernacular poetry as well as prose virtually ends with James VI.²⁰ Crucially, one of his readers was Hugh MacDiarmid, whose word was law in the first half of the 20th century. His own nationalistic, communist bias meant that his views anticipated Wittig’s. And he went so far as to deny the existence of any Renaissance worth the name in Scotland. James had encouraged artifice and escapism rather than “the real national situation” so that our national literature missed out on the European movement of the day, favoring instead anglicization and artifice.²¹

Their “villainous” vision of James VI is a good starting point for illustrating the sophistry of the claim. Only read that King’s rhetorical treatise, *The Reulis and Cautelis*, and you will see that James, during his

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early reign at the Edinburgh court, anticipated MacDiarmid’s own defensive linguistic measures and did so for equally patriotic reasons. While the latter created synthetic Scots to counter anglicization, the young James urged his court poets to highlight their Scottishness by using figures such as alliteration which suited the stronger sounds of their native tongue. They did so in a monarch-led movement which was not uncontrolled but, if anything, over-planned by a man who had seen the tragic outcome of ignoring literary politics in the fate of his mother. And after he became King, although he did encourage his poets to anglicize their verse, he did so in acknowledgement of changed political circumstances in a carefully considered, conservative manner. For example his poets were urged to retain Scots words where no English synonym existed and to allow their Scottish accents to sign their nationality in the aural culture of the day.

The sonnet was the modal banner of James’s courtly Scottish Renaissance. The opening octet to William Fowler’s *Tarantula of Love* is therefore an appropriate textual focus for demonstrating the ways in which even an artificial European mode can sign patriotism:

O yow who heres the accent of my smart
diffusd in ryme and sad disordred verse,
gif ever flams of love hath touchte your hart,
I trust with sobbs and teares the same to perse;
Yea, even in these ruid rigours I rehere,
Which I depaint with blodie, bloodless wounds,
I think dispered soules there plaints sal sperse,
And mak the haggard rocks resound sad sounds.

This is the early period of James’s Edinburgh rule. Fowler is one of his Castalian Band of court poets. One would therefore expect him to follow the monarch’s rhetorical rules closely. His use of alliteration and late Middle Scots provide the most obvious signs of that indebtedness. Not only language and figures but also versification signs the distinctively “Scottish” definition of the form. The interlacing rhyme scheme [ababcdedefgg] – only regularly employed by Spenser among British poets – was used in over ninety per cent of Castalian sonnets.

That Fowler opens his sonnet sequence with a loose translation of “Voi ch’ascoltate in rime sparse il suono,” Petrarch’s opening sonnet in

22 James VI, *Reulis and Cautelis*, Chapter III.
his *Rime*, adds two further signs of Scottishness. In comparative European terms, James had, for personal and political reasons, favored French sources (e.g. Saint Gelais, Du Bartas) at a time when Italian sources were the fashion in England. Most Castalians confirmed that bias. Fowler, whose Italian was particularly strong, proves an exception to this “rule.” The national bias then changes: after the Union, Italian models dominate Drummond and Alexander’s Italianate sequences while in England French lyrics become the fashion.

That the poem is a translation carries the patriotic case a stage forward. James encouraged his Castalians to translate freely from foreign tongues. But he did so in accordance with the views of his time. As Matthiessen points out the Renaissance translator compared himself to Drake and Raleigh. As the latter two colonized foreign lands and expended Elizabeth’s realm, so the Castalians expanded the Scots tongue by colonizing foreign words. That patriotism may be artificially signed is a premise which too many critics fail to recognize. Accept the evidence provided in the Scottish Renaissance and the virtuoso poems and prose of this period from Stewart’s “Literall sonnet” to *The Jewel* of Sir Thomas Urquhart cease to be étitist exercises. As the “Universal Language” preface to *The Jewel* confirms, such poetry aims via foreign coinages and by adopting the widest range of decorous styles to make the country’s language the most precise of all so that it can encompass more subtle ideas than other nations while at once enabling and shortening the education of the young.

James’s *Reulis* and the sonnet form provide a final reason for rejecting the simple mythic account of the Renaissance. Noting that love has so far been the topic for that form in Europe, he argues for a break with convention. On formal grounds, he advises Scottish sonneteers to adopt a wider topical remit, including debate and panegyric. Personal interest is evident here. Sonnets in his praise were heard in court and composed for his *Essayes of a Prentise*. But the new range also challenges the claim that the Renaissance Scottish sonnet did not deal with real life. John Stewart of Baldyneis, who also composes panegyrics and moral sonnets, employs the debate form for bawdry as well. In the “Host and Hostess” sonnets he uses these terms as metaphors for the sexual act. The man’s dissatisfaction with his lodgings is easily trumped by the woman’s claim that, because he did not fill them to her

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25 *Reulis*, Chapter VII.
28 *Reulis*, Chapter VIII.
satisfaction, he should next time “tak [her] bak chalmer for [his] guckit noise.”

This analysis began by turning MacDiarmid’s influential dismissal of the Scottish Renaissance on its head. James, his elected “villain-traitor-angliciser,” can instead be seen to anticipate MacDiarmid’s own synthetic Scots. It ended by showing precisely those concerns with politics and the “real” world which MacDiarmid claimed could be no part of courtly artifice. Most crucially of all, it replaced his claims that Scotland had no Renaissance with evidence of a vernacular revival which, if anything, was too analytically conceived and controlled by James as David, Apollo and Maecenas.

James’s Reulis continue to offer valuable evidence when attention turns from rhetorical techniques to the European context of the Renaissance. Those who support the inward-looking nationalistic view of literature, seeking for down-to-earth Scots writing naturalistically in Scots on Scottish themes, naturally dismiss the large body of skilful Neo-Latin writing composed at the time.

In fact, consideration of that corpus is vital to the study of cultural politics in the period. James’s Reulis rely not only on English but European (especially French) sources. And although their major aim is the fostering of a lyrical, vernacular revival, there is one major exception to this vision. Politics or “materis of commoun weill … are to grave materis” for vernacular “Poetis to mell in.” As a result the major corpus of political verse during his entire reign is composed in Latin. Those who lament the lack of political comment in the verse of the period especially in relation to his later anglicizing guidelines are therefore looking in the wrong place. To discover the spirit in which those Anglo-Scots poets faced London, the Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum is the obvious source.

In that anthology, from Arthur Johnston’s patriotic versions of Scottish monarchic history to Robert Ayton’s panegyrics the evidence is clear. Scottish political condescension to England marks out their reaction rather than a craven spirit of literary awe before Shakespeare and Jonson. And in that re-defined context it becomes understandable that linguistic accommodations were seen as slight sacrifices when the proposed end was teaching the English those lessons of peacefulness embodied in a Scottish King who now accedes to the thrones of Great

30 Reulis Chapter VII.
Britain and Ireland as well as having claims to France.  

The opening of George Buchanan’s *Epithalamium* for Queen Mary’s wedding provides an example of this kind of patriotic pride:

\[
\text{Sine milite Scoto} \\
\text{Nulla unquam Francis fulsit Victoria castris,} \\
\text{Nulla unquam Hectorides sine Scot sanguine clades} \\
\text{Saevior oppressit...}
\]

[Without the Scottish soldier no victory shone on French camps, no fiercer defeat ever oppressed the Gauls without Scottish blood.]

Buchanan’s verses challenge, polymathically, another “Scots alone” conclusion – that the Scottish Renaissance should be hurriedly passed over because it is, qualitatively, poor. That this poverty coincides with the Golden Period of English literature has been seen to add a competitive intensity to that negative assessment. On the vernacular side, the dismissive conclusion is silently but sophistically confirmed in those Anthologies that use Wittig to determine the canon. Roderick Watson, for example, “covers” courtly verse from Montgomerie in the early 1580s to the end of the seventeenth century in eleven pages out of 711. He can do so because he is applying Wittig’s methods to the period that is least sympathetic to them. The seventeenth century has no examples of courtly verse at all, Gaelic and the folk tradition filling that gap. Yet Alastair Fowler in his anthology of British Seventeenth Century verse finds five Scottish poets worthy of representation in competition for space with Milton, Donne and Herbert. And while James himself, William Alexander and Montrose are briefly exemplified, both Robert Ayton (14 lyrics, 11 pages) and William Drummond (26 lyrics, 22 pages) rank among the foremost in that time of English excellence.

It is appropriate to end the qualitative argument with Buchanan and his reputation. In the European Renaissance, Latin’s position as the shared medium for learned writing gave it unique importance. And once the Scottish Renaissance is considered in this way, the country can boast in Buchanan a writer whom many regard as “first of all poets in his

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32 e.g. *Delitiae* I, 13–17, Patrick Adamson, *Genethliacum Serenissimi Scotiae, Angliae et Hiberniae Princeps, Jacobum VI*.  
This casts a more favorable light on Scottish neo-Latin composition in the Renaissance than even the best of the country’s vernacular writers.

The Bibliography of Scottish Literature [boslit@nls.uk] confirms this. In that massive online record, Montgomerie, Drummond and Urquhart do not attract many translators but their Latin compatriots do. The records before 1700 show Buchanan having 32 entries across 7 languages. Even that is outdone by the 37 across nine languages for John Barclay, whose Argenis, a political allegory dealing with recent European history, was the only Scottish Romance which William Alexander deemed worthy to join Homer and Tasso in the ranks of genius. Of course, Latin enjoyed a much wider European readership than Scots. That said, even a basic diachronic examination of the retained “myths” which still influence today’s thinking raises real doubts about their validity rhetorically, politically, aesthetically, and “popularly.”

Mythologising II: “Vernacular Revival” and “Enlightenment”? The balance between overall optimism and an awareness, in minor key, of those limitations which still face us in the early period continues for later areas of specialisation. There are many who still cling to the convenient belief that the theory and practice of the Makars is irrelevant but the way forward has been traced by a number of scholars. There is no way back to mythic simplification cum avoidance now that Murray Pittock and Robert Crawford (among others) have proved themselves aware, albeit in different ways, of the need to pay more than lip service to the past. At the same time their major interests lie in the eighteenth century and, understandably, the bias and chronological structuring of their work mirrors that bias. Discrimination, in this context, will again begin with scrutiny of the broad terminology employed. That established, any areas in which a nicer understanding of early works and theory is needed to harmonize the way forward will be discussed. To do this economically without myself falling into mythic generalizing I shall use Burns and then Barrie to “prove” (probe) any “rules” which may emerge.

35 Estienne’s opinion on Buchanan (“Poetarum sui sæculi facile princeps”) was echoed in his own day by Chrestien, ‘renommé’ (1567); Steier, “sehr berühmte” (1571) and Bargagli, “ultimamente lodato” (1587).


Traditionally, Burns follows Ramsay and Fergusson in a movement called “The Vernacular Revival.” While that phrase accurately reflects their interest in Scots even in that context the use of “The” inaccurately suggests that it is the first of such movements, when Douglas and James VI are only the most obvious of earlier movers. Linguistically, “The” is also misleading. Here is the simplified version of polymathic truth identified by Roubaud. That Burns is himself a living myth embracing all of the anti-English nationalistic criteria means that many critics still support this assumption. But in idolizing the man, they underestimate his artistry. The textual source of the revival is Watson's Choice Collection, a mainly 16th and 17th century anthology of Scottish writers which contains as many poems in English as in Scots or Anglo-Scotts. Burns’s immediate “vernacular” predecessors, Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, both wrote elegant Latin and English verse as well as their Scots songs and poems. Ramsay even demanded two pen names when joining a literary club. To sign his heritage as Scots makar and English Neoclassical he claimed Gavin Douglas and Isaac Bickerstaff as models of his dual heritage.38

Rhetorically, too, Burns's poems and letters reveal a buried heritage. He was an avid reader of Pope and Shenstone as well as The Wallace. He eagerly petitioned booksellers for translations of Voltaire and Petrarch. In an autobiographical letter, he also admits a thorough schooling in rhetoric.39 By the age of 11, he sees himself as “absolutely a Critic in substantives, verbs and particles” while the length of his sources recorded in Tom Crawford’s book confirms an originality founded on Classical-Renaissance ideas of imitation and invention.

Indeed, he met his two aims of becoming Scotland’s bard and a neoclassical poet by re-invoking the dual nationalistic/decorous linguistic model of the early makars.40 Like Dunbar he took advantage of the additional registers his Scots-English heritage offered. Mastery of Latinate English, different varieties of Anglo-Scots and Scots-English, down to thick Scots, gave both poets a wider range of stylistic levels than those available to their English contemporaries. However, Douglas’s advocacy of Scots not Sudron in the specifically patriotic mode of translation suggests a different, yet complementary, approach to language. Here, following James’s “rule” for emphasizing the stronger, guttural sounds of Scots, the lowest decorous range becomes the direct vehicle for patriotic protest. In that persona, and in Scots, Burns rants against foreign cultures, their pretentious music, their weak drink and

39 Burns, Letters I, 135.
their lack of haggises. Like the makars and Ramsay changed criteria give him the best of both worlds. In his allegory, *The Vision*, for example, he does not praise Coila, the Muse of Ayrshire, in thick Scots but in the Spenserean high style complete with Latinate and archaic vocabulary. She is "a wildly-witty, rustic grace" seated "on the deep green-mantled Earth, warm-cherishing every floweret's birth" while listening to her servile bard express his "embryo-tuneful flame."

A final example will relate these linguistic, rhetorical and decorous arguments to James’s early Castalian Renaissance in particular and to another Ayrshire versifier, the “maister poete” of that group – Alexander Montgomerie – in particular. In Burns’ cantata, *The Jolly Beggars*, the Bard character defines himself in Wittig’s radical, realistic and unpretentiously Scottish terms. Drink inspires his left wing songs rather than Castalia’s streams:

Bard: I never drank the Muses’ STANK,  
    Castalia’s burn an’ a’ that,  
But there it streams [drink] an’ richly reams,  
    My HELICON I ca’ that.41

Yet the opening stanzas of the same cantata not only prove Burns’ mastery of all the skills his Bard-persona damns but does so in the highly complex, fourteen line bob and wheel stanza employed by the leader of James VI’s Castalian band, Alexander Montgomerie, for his best known musical performance *The Cherrie and the Slae*.42 Even the same musical setting (“The Banks o’ Helicon”) is adopted. And where had Burns read *The Cherrie and the Slae*? In Watson’s Choice Collection.

If Burns’s example shows how the eulogistic side of myth may praise the man to underestimate the artist, J.M. Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*, offers the equivalent in detraction. A Scottish dramatist whose popularity on the London West End matched that of Andrew Lloyd Webber to-day, Barrie fails to meet the myth’s negative, anglophobic criteria for Scottishness and so gets a bad press in Scotland particularly.

That it was the *London* stage is his first problem. Add his comic/satiric rather than serious/tragic strengths and he is condemned for mocking his own people for the benefit of the “auld enemy.” His readiness to mix with the upper reaches of London society blots his radical card. Most damning of all, in the black and white terms of the myth, he is a fantasist and not a realist. What place, one of his Scottish critics asks, do childish tales about a Never Land have when serious,

42 I have discussed these issues fully in “Burns as Sassenach Poet,” Burns Now, ed. Kenneth Simpson (Edinburgh, 1994), 150–66.
down-to-earth writing about Scotland’s fate in the Industrial Revolution is needed)? This view maintains its seductive simplicity by avoiding the strong contrary evidence regarding Barrie’s training at Edinburgh University on the mistaken grounds that he “mugged up his notes” and escaped with relief. In fact, anyone who consults Barrie’s lecture notes or his academic essays on Skelton, Nash, Hardy and Meredith will see that he was enthusiastic not only about the literature course taught by David Masson, the Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, but also gained merits in Metaphysics and Mathematics.

Masson’s lectures and published works illustrate that the Scottish Rhetorical tradition still dominated in the Edinburgh of the early 1880s. But they do so in a way that highlights our need to differentiate the schools of thought at that time. As mirrored in barrie’s notes, Masson’s lectures do begin with Aristotle and Rhetoric but his own favourite period, the English Renaissance, soon introduces his second key critic. For Masson, Aristotle’s account of mimesis along with Francis Bacon on the imagination form the essential grounding for all criticism. In the dominant terms of the day, this means that he does not set the “Real” (Aristotle) against the “Ideal” (Bacon) as Barrie’s kailyard critics will do. Instead he balances the two in a more refined manner. First, he re-defines the Real in Renaissance terms as “the artificial concrete.” Then he offers a nicer description of the Ideal as not only imagination’s power to cover all allegorical levels potentially but also as the Platonic Idea. That the artificial Real and the Ideal’s imaginative presentation of type characters must mingle at the highest level of writing is an initial premise, again realized at its highest in Shakespeare. For Masson, he is at once the best Realist (“Never was a world so vivid, so pictorially real, so visually distinct as that of Shakespeare’s plays”) and the most daringly Idealistic in both the Platonic and fanciful senses of that term.

Masson distinguishes the two poetic impulses clearly but favours Bacon’s emphasis on the specifically poetic range and ideological focus of the latter: “The question with the Realist artist with respect to what he conceives is ‘How would this actually be in nature?’ the question with the Ideal artist is ‘What can be made out of this? With what human conclusions, ends, and aspirations can it be imaginatively interwoven?’”

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43 George Blake, Barrie and the Kailyard School (London, 1951), 65, passim.
44 Dennis Mackail, JMB (London, 1941), 60.
45 National Library of Scotland ADV MSS 6652, 1–57.
48 David Masson, British Novelists and their Style (Cambridge, 1859), 250.
This world and the critical values it clearly and hierarchically presented were enthusiastically received by Barrie. That writers who presented the real comically and imaginatively (e.g. Dickens, Cervantes) stood especially high in this scheme encouraged a student who already knew that his strengths lay in fancy and satire. The vast difference between this critical model and its “Scottish,” kailyard counterpart is the first illustration of why such nicety is needed. Evaluate even Barrie’s most successful plays, say Peter Pan and Dear Brutus, against simplistic standards of realism within a climate which opposes artifice and keeps silent on the English Renaissance and their kailyard description as sentimental escapism follows.

If instead, one looks at these plays in relation to the highest tests of artistry as modally defined by Masson for Shakespeare, a completely different picture emerges. He valued what he called Shakespeare’s “sylvan” romances particularly highly. He approved of the circular structure of As You Like It and A Midsummer Night’s Dream because it moved from stylized realism and the dramatic highlighting of set issues via imaginative testing of those ideas in the simpler setting of the rural past to a re-examination of the original questions. The same structure is adopted by Barrie in his Shakespearean romances. But what George Blake on a surface reading and against realistic criteria sees as escapism to the rustic past is, for Barrie as for Masson’s Shakespeare, “the voluntary and avowed transference of the poet into a kind of existence, which as being one of the few elementary conditions was therefore best suited for the exercise of pure phantasy.”

The circular form of Quality Street, The Admirable Crichton and Dear Brutus, for example, open with the dramatic highlighting of an idea in the artificially real manner of the Renaissance. These are, respectively, the imprisonment of female talent in a patriarchal society, the debate between birth and merit as models for society and an examination of the question of free will. These are then referred to simpler, more natural worlds – not to escape but to re-examine these ideas across imagination’s potential range in the essentialist worlds of wood or island.

There is an even higher test – that represented by Shakespeare’s mature romances. The Tempest and its companions are the supreme test of genius. The reason for that superiority introduces the second, theoretical area in which Masson’s precise arguments need to be considered. Shakespeare’s mature Romances, he argues, are a supreme test because they mirror inclusively all levels of another hierarchy, that of allegory. Unlike what he calls the sylvan romances they are not confined to tropological issues but rise to analogy and even mirror the

49 Masson, British Novelists, 68.
quintessential harmony of the spheres. “Do [idealism and realism] ever quintessentially merge?” he asks in his Shakespeare lectures. And the answer comes – yes, but in Shakespeare’s mature romances alone as they face the most “extreme” of artistic “challenges” by addressing the ultimate mysteries of life.

Barrie’s dramatic practice confirms the need for more discrimination in this area when assessing his status in wider literary terms. Only two of his Shakespearean romances go beyond time and each signs that advance by adaptations of the basic circular scheme. In Peter Pan he uses the child’s elemental view of birth, copulation and death as his quasi-comic focus. In Act 1 the Darling children play at birth, in Act 2 the shooting of Wendy and her emergence from the hut as a mother “plays” out copulation while the climax to Act 3 Pan’s melodramatic anticipation of death leads into a consciously Darwinian battle for power between the sexes. An extra scene, returning to fantasy and the Never Land signs the significant relationship between form and meaning urged by Masson in his rhetoric lectures. Mary Rose, whose original MSS ends with the faery-girl entering Peter’s Never Land, also signs structurally in its addressing of final questions. Two time structures rather than one place the magic island at the play’s a-temporal center. This keeps the fantasy island at the center of deeper time.

Masson’s criticism not only guides understanding of Barrie’s art, it also explains the strong Christian Humanist background to his critical thinking. Discrimination here implies a closer examination of this school of thought and its place within the late rhetorical model in the 1880s. Like so many of the late Victorian teachers, Masson had clerical connections being an ordained preacher. His philosophy and theology as well as his views on literature therefore conform to Christian values. Topically, he consistently places metaphysics above politics and morals: “The thought of the Whence, the thought of the Why, the thought of the Whether” are always, for him, “more massive and enduring . . .” Applied to Scottish writers, his inclusive view of “Real” and “Ideal” reflects the same bias. Scottish themes? Yes. “Part of every Scotchman’s outfit in life is...his Scotticism.” Only Scottishness? No. To remain on a nationalistic plane is to miss the intellectually extreme [where] “the highest genius alone resides” because “the sentiment of Nationalism is essentially negative” and the all-important realm of “Scotch metaphysics” is ignored.52

Another Edinburgh professor confirmed many of Masson’s views. Alexander Campbell Fraser was an ordained minister who held the chair

51 Shakespeare Personally, 137, 155.
of Logic and Metaphysics when Barrie attended university. His new course on psychology, with its anticipation of Sartre’s idea of the ever-recreated personality, fitted in well with Barrie’s belief in his own chameleon character, while Fraser’s acceptance of Bishop Berkeley’s contention that all understanding begins with the senses led to Barrie highlighting in his own drama those aural and visual effects which were more powerfully embodied in the theatre than the novel.\textsuperscript{53}

This essay’s central focus on my own major period of specialization makes it an overtly personal view. As the Renaissance was also central to Tom Scott’s concerns, however, that training has enabled me to offer a direct and mainly positive, comparative view of the “state of the discipline” to-day. But many of the difficulties Scott identified still exist albeit in different forms. “Replacing” the lost Renaissance offers major challenges to specialists in all periods. New polymathic and theoretical-Scholastic challenges have also been identified for those who still maintain an essentially conservative view of the early period.

Nor does the mythic, synchronic heritage of Wittig apply to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries alone. Now that the Scottish Renaissance has been assessed on its own terms, the polarized logic that sets James VI and Drummond in treacherous black against Henryson and Dunbar in patriotic white can no longer be accepted. For specialists in later periods, however, another difficult transitional picture has emerged with as many literary critics remaining true to Wittig’s eclectic canonical principles as there are those who demonstrate practical awareness of the new critical and theoretical contexts set for pre-Enlightenment verse.

In stressing the Christian-Humanist tradition for early literature, re-defining ‘The Vernacular Revival’ slogan for Burns, and using recent research to discredit the prevalent ‘escapist’ view of Barrie, I have tried to advance understanding of Scottish literature today rather than reviewing the current state of play. My reasons for this return me to Tom Scott’s early overview. The publishing houses, he argued, ignored Scottish writing as a minor, unprofitable market. We are faced with a variation on that theme. The discipline having been established and a ready market for introductory texts defined, the same profit motive encourages us to write and re-write introductory texts. Of course “Introductions to,” “Histories of” and “Companions to” have an important part to play in the publicizing of any discipline. In the Barrie discussion, however, I anticipated the other side to that equation. Only background research securely establishes the case for Renaissance influences on his work. As T.S. Eliot argued, only that kind of factual

\textsuperscript{53} For full discussion of Campbell Fraser’s influence, see \textit{Myths and the Mythmaker}, 61–73.
evidence takes the in-fighting of different critical interpretations a stage forward: “It is fairly certain,” Eliot explained, “that ‘interpretation’ is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all but merely putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed.”\textsuperscript{54}

Without doubt, before another History of Scottish Literature appears, more studies of such a kind are needed. Yet, while scholarly works are still funded in some countries, market forces and the short periods between one research exercise and another militate against that kind of progress here. By all means let us congratulate ourselves on the distance we have come. But do not underestimate the challenges to come.

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