IN DEFENSE OF INFERIORISM (AND OTHER LOST CAUSES)

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I always learn from the work of Murray Pittock and Gerard Carruthers, and their position papers on the state of Scottish literary studies are no exception. I am especially taken with their sweeping visions of a field emerging from the academic wilderness or, perhaps better said, with their accounts of the historically uneven development between Scottish literature—often hugely influential (as in the well-known cases of Burns, Scott, and Stevenson)—and Scottish literary studies, which as a discipline has often been more apologetic and parochial, and seemingly less dynamic, than the material it engages. Call it a “Caledonian Antisyzygy” of the field itself, a schism that has occasionally informed work by the same person, as with the wildly diverse (and sometimes simply wild) output of Hugh MacDiarmid. Pittock and Carruthers insightfully detail a host of reasons for this asynchronous relationship, from evolving attitudes toward nationalism, the presence or absence of institutional infrastructures (such as Scottish-literary curricula in the schools and universities), and the formation of venues for scholarly discussion (at university presses and, from 1963, in the journal Studies in Scottish Literature) to links with Irish studies during the peace process and seismic shifts within the vast territory of literary studies as a whole.

And yet, particularly in reading Carruthers’s insightful analysis of the interdependent relationship between, on the one hand, essentialist notions of Scottish literature and, on the other, biases toward its English counterpart (in the work of David Craig, David Daiches, and others), I found myself once again admiring so-called “inferiorist” Scottish criticism and its brash obverse that Carruthers humorously dubs “MacDiarmidism.” That is, and perhaps perversely, I began thinking with appreciation about the cringing comparativism one finds in the criticism of Edwin Muir and John Speirs as well as Craig and Daiches, and also about the defensive assertiveness of an integral Scottish tradition that one finds in the work of Kurt Wittig and other historians of Scottish literature and that continues into subsequent decades (as though bare existence—
the elucidation of a tradition—were an achievement to be celebrated rather than a puzzle demanding explication). I say this not because I disdain the process of what Carruthers calls “normalization” as a manifestation of disciplinary health, grafting new voices, venues, and conversations to a lifeline of curricula and funding streams. We are a long way from Muir’s damning appraisals of divided consciousness. But I must admit, I still feel deep admiration for Muir’s scathing rehearsal of the nation’s cultural deficiencies (Walter Scott “spent most of his days in a hiatus, in a country, that is to say, which was neither a nation nor a province, and had, instead of a centre, a blank, an Edinburgh, in the middle of it”1), if not for its conclusions then for the boldness of its conception and sheer force of its eloquence. Tom Nairn would later attack Muir’s rationale with damning—and equally forceful, albeit religiously bigoted—ferocity: “Start with [the] Idealism” of a Scottish Golden Age in prelapsarian, pre-Reformation Scotland, as Muir does, “and you end up embracing the Scarlet Woman of Rome.”2 This is powerful writing, not only in the eros of its sentence-level locution but also in the compelling nature of its thought, however problematic (or flat-out wrong-headed) such inferiorist notions may have been as literary and cultural history. Smith’s “antisyzygy,” Daiches’s “paradox,” Nairn’s “tartan monster,” Alan Bold’s “state of mind”—there is a serendipity if not always a rigor to these and other conceptions.

Inferiorism—the sense that Scottish literature labors with cultural handicaps it occasionally turns to its own advantage (for instance, in Nairn: “To understand why Scotland did not ‘go nationalist’ at the usual time and in the usual way is, in my opinion, to understand a great deal about European nationalism in general”3)—bears many names (i.e., “negative nationalism,” as Cairns Craig has recently called it4) and remains a part of the disciplinary landscape. Craig, venturing across both sides of the inferiorist line, devised a brilliant apothegm with his 1996 book Out of History, creating a grand narrative about Scotland’s anti-realist tradition relative to England’s before later characterizing that assessment as partly misguided.5 I take Craig’s point, as I do the argument that Carruthers is making. However, I was so provoked by the

2 Nairn, The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism, 3rd ed. (orig. pub. 1977; Altona Vic, Australia: Common Ground, 2003), 111
3 The Break-Up of Britain, 96.
power of these and other formulations from the pre-history of the present discipline that I crafted a large argument concerning the “ruinous” nature of experience in modernity—an argument drawing from English as well as Scottish literature, from eighteenth-century legal history, and from twentieth-century philosophy ranging from the Frankfurt School to deconstruction and psychoanalysis—around the romantic marginalization of the Scottish Highlands in the late eighteenth century.\(^6\) For me, Scottish apologetics in the inferiorist mode had a muse-like usefulness beyond their subject matter, serving as potential templates for structures much larger than themselves or indeed than any national literature. At root, Scottish inferiorism (at least of the Muir, Nairn, Daiches, D. Craig, and C. Craig varieties) was not “criticism,” it was “theory.” And in many instances it was not out of history as much as ahead of its time.\(^7\)

Whatever one makes of this school of thought, it makes up an important part of the history of Scottish literary studies. Its traces are still evident in a journal like *Scottish Literary Review*, which makes a point of “approaching Scottish literature in an expansive way” through multidisciplinary contexts and comparative studies.\(^8\) The implicit polemical target here is a parochial criticism and the conflicted species of aggrandized self-loathing that accompanies it. Parochialism actually requires a kind of odd and ingenious legerdemain: it must privilege texts that it also qualifies as (necessarily) mundane, and hence as (magnificently) typical products of a tradition rather than as one-off secretions of writerly geniuses irreducible to the sponsoring culture. Declarations of “expansive” critical interest on the part of *SLR* thus articulate an anxious confidence whose uncanny double may be found in the actual contents of most every issue of the journal in the form of compulsively recuperative scholarship on texts that have largely disappeared from public view, not only because they were buried in the dustbin of history but also because, in some cases, they had already rendered themselves vulnerable to what Pittock calls “legislative Northumberlandism” by the determined regionalism of their aesthetic vision. As virtually all scholars of Scottish literature realize, regionalism is one of the most interesting and dynamic traits of many Scottish texts (by authors ranging from Nan Shepherd and Lewis Grassic Gibbon to


\(^7\) I try to elucidate some of these dynamics in my essay “Scotland, the Event; or, Theory after Muir,” in *The International Journal of Scottish Literature* 3 (2007): http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue3/wickman.htm

\(^8\) This makes up part of the editorial statement by Sarah Dunnigan and Margery Palmer McCulloch preliminary to every semi-annual issue of the journal.
Sorley MacLean and Edwin Morgan—including many lesser-known figures to whom SLR devotes so many pages). But the creative panache for “place” also tempts the type of canon-forming national (or even more narrowly identitarian) politics away from which, as Pittock remarks, literary studies began moving in the 1980s, if not earlier.

SLR’s editorial quandary (to be expansive and contractive simultaneously: the function of Scottish criticism at the present—and every—time) is not unique: virtually all the major venues declare themselves contextualizing and comparativist. Still, if one discerns in such positions the residual inferiorism of a self-conscious refusal of a parochialism it nevertheless necessarily admits, and if one gazes at the wider literary-theoretical world, it quickly becomes evident that residual Scottish inferiorism bears distinguished company. It may be useful to remind ourselves that an inferiorist dialectic informs virtually every discrete discipline; it is less a cause of shame than a rule of the game. Its traces are widely evident in the most elite reaches of philosophy and theory, for example. Martin Heidegger’s massively-influential philosophy of “being” derived its self-importance from its purported difference from the mathematical and empirical positivism of modern science; indeed, it was the acknowledged dominance of the latter that provided Heidegger with the leverage of his critique, converting ontology’s supposedly inferior (because thoroughly mundane) status into the evidence of its moral and intellectual superiority.9 Deconstruction’s subsequent “literization” of philosophy went the additional step of articulating a theory of supplementarity (or paradoxically integral addenda both stabilizing and undercutting core ideas) whose compulsive commentaries on all modes of cultural discourse did not extend to affirmative statements about its own “method” (for fear of falling prey to its own practices).10 In effect, deconstruction meant “more” because it formally

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10 Jacques Derrida’s famously and supposedly most uncharacteristic moment of making positive and (almost) traditionally philosophical assertions for deconstruction occurred in his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” when he asserted that there are “two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play,” and then placed deconstruction on one side of that ledger. (See “Structure, Sign and Play” in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 292. Edward Said remarked that this essay displays Derrida arguing in favor of a particular “method” (in The World, the Text, and the Critic [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983], 145-46), but Paul de Man discerned something more
proposed “less.” Today, to cite a final example, one regularly finds scholars of the humanities asserting the reconsolidation of the “two cultures” and claiming spiritual ownership of the historical idea of the university even as they decry declining financial support for their disciplines within the former’s administrative structure.  

In these and myriad other cases, inferiorism is less a contingent political or cultural circumstance than a poignant critical strategy. For that reason alone, the historical presence of inferiorism in Scottish literary studies should prompt us to rethink the significance of its purportedly declining place in the field. Or, putting it otherwise and paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, it may be that the historical place of inferiorism in a discipline whose evolution is pushing the field ever nearer to “normalization” is also making it possible for us to behold a new beauty in what is vanishing. In its way, inferiorism bears a trace of the élan that Slavoj Žižek identifies with the “defense of lost causes.” Such causes consist in big ideas (Žižek’s favorites are Marxism and psychoanalysis) whose principles defy pragmatic, vaguely liberal notions of a triumphantly global society. The aim of a devotion to lost causes, Žižek says, is not to defend social schemes gone horribly wrong (Stalinism being his prime exhibit), “but to render problematic the all-too-easy liberal-democratic alternative” of, in the case of Scottish studies, normalization. Žižek’s friend Alain Badiou defines this “normative” contemporary situation as a “democratic materialism” whose postulate is that “there are only bodies and languages,” that is, contingent (in Aristotelian language, “historical”) human circumstances replete with

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their diverse modes of expression.\textsuperscript{14} Badiou and Žižek loathe this pomo state for its vacuous pluralism, which they claim guarantees hegemonic capital and thus militates against any truly radical alternative. If we cast this dynamic in Scottish-political terms, this state of sameness-in-difference would correspond with a “unionist” mentality undercutting national autonomy by swallowing it up into a larger collective and also with a concept of independence predicated on the idea of Scotland being “open for business.” The point is that each option is effectively and reductively the same.

Hence, for Žižek, the “lost cause” is also the beginning of some new possibility. Relative to Scottish literary studies, the lost cause thus answers the very fair (and even courageous) question that Carruthers poses: “If we cannot any longer maintain the notion of a singular Scottish literature and culture, and if its pluralities do not all make for easy bedfellows, as in the case of almost any other national culture (including most certainly that of England), then so what?” I love the insouciance of this query for its bold willingness to liquidate if not Scottish literature then at least a certain tradition in Scottish literary criticism. But I also appreciate the fact that Carruthers implicitly answers his own question by asserting that “Scottish literature is often not under-developed compared to elsewhere; often it is remarkably similar to elsewhere, marching to the same historic beats of international culture.” Indeed, “often” though not always. Hence, and Carruthers again is correct on this point, “Scotland does have a Renaissance, an Augustan period, a Romantic period,” and so on. But as Pittock persuasively argues elsewhere, the Scottish Romantic tradition is not only irreducible to its English counterpart but it also divulges the “ideology” of a romantic concept that defines entrenched habits of thought as much as the historical field of early nineteenth-century “British” literature, and that is actually brought most forcefully to bear after World War Two.\textsuperscript{15} Hence, a comparative but ultimately positive concept of Scottish Romanticism (call it Kurt Wittig’s impetus revised and intensified), equips us not only to better understand Burns, but also, perhaps, Bourdieu. That is, it helps us recognize not only its (Scottish) object of study but also, and in the strongest traditions of twentieth-century cultural criticism (in Adorno, Benjamin, Jameson, \textit{et al}), the conventions of normalization that obscure the moral and political economies of a profoundly strange world.

Is such a heuristic, apprehending lost traditions and lost causes,


“inferiorist”? One should hope so. Because inferiorism describes a historical and even “traditional” mode of critique that, for all its foibles and errors, sought to clear paths where it perceived there were none, or at least far fewer than elsewhere. And in seeking to explain these voids in the field and in what lay outside it, it devised a host of compelling (even if, yes, reductively simplistic) associations: Scottish literature as emblematic of modernist alienation (Muir), or of self-consciously hollow representations (David Craig’s image of Enlightenment Edinburgh as a petite London), or of a national culture born, deformedly, of its own kitsch (Nairn). Inferiorism may have bequeathed to Scottish literary studies some very bad history, but it also projected Scottish literature as an uncanny presence in an “expansive” modernity, and thus fashioned some powerful paradigms through which to think. This is a legacy worth contemplating and even celebrating as we relaunch the preeminent journal of the field’s pre-normalized pre-history.

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