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The Arts and Education: Notes Towards a Manifesto for Uncertain Times

Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat (Friday 16 September 2016; also in the *Sunday Herald* supplement 18 September 2016)

Over the last two weeks, we've looked at the work of the American artist Alice Neel and her two Scottish contemporaries, William Gillies and John Maxwell. When they began working, none of them had an audience. They had to endure and trust to the development of fair appraisal. Why was there no immediate public appreciation? As the major historian of Scottish art Duncan MacMillan puts it, "A nation that does not know its art does not know itself."

This week we'd like to draw some conclusions about art, education, democracy and cultural identity.

The current political climate prompts us to look for conclusions, things we could be definite about. Everywhere these days, obviously enough, there is uncertainty. Less easily understood is the fact that uncertainty is a tactic. Not a self-conscious strategy, because it's been generated by people who don't know what they're doing or how to control it, much less how to make something good come out of it, but a tactic in which they are caught as much as their victims. Once you understand this, the question is how to oppose it. And there's only one answer: with certainty. Patience is part of that, but a clear understanding of value is its necessary sustenance, the core and driving force. The practice of doubt, questioning everything, is in itself part of this certainty. Don't take anything for granted but ask yourself, what do you know, for sure? And what do you want, exactly, and why? How do you say clearly what it is? Persuasion only goes so far. If the case is solid and good, state it, stand by it, and let it sink in.

The question of democracy depends on education and a fair representation of the people.

Education is important because democracy offers you choices and you need to know what you are choosing between. But the nature of education and the relation between education and democracy has changed since the 1950s. The Irish scholar Declan Kiberd makes this point with regard to that international army of jargon-led, over-professionalised academics specialising in the works of James Joyce, when he says in *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Life in Joyce's Masterpiece* (2009): "Many of them reject the notion of a national culture, assuming that to be cultured nowadays is to be international, even global, in consciousness. In doing this, they have often removed Joyce from the Irish context which gave his work so much of its meaning and value... The middle decades of the 20th century were the years in which the idea of a common culture was abandoned – yet *Ulysses* depends on that very notion."

So does all great art. Joyce described himself, Kiberd reminds us, as: “a socialist artist and a believer in participatory democracy – that everyone, whether wealthy enough to have a higher education or not, should have equal access to this common culture. He would have agreed with RH Tawney’s contention that ‘opportunities to rise are no substitute for a general diffusion of the means of civilisation,’ something that was needful for all, both rich and poor.”

When Joyce was writing *Ulysses* (1922), the world was only beginning to experience the possibilities of mass literacy and the emergence of reading libraries for working people. HG Wells’s *Outline of History* sold more than two million copies when it was published in 1920. Just after the First World War there was a decline in the authority of church and state and an assertion that working people possessed innate human dignity. Democracy meant that anyone might enjoy and understand Shakespeare. But after the middle of the 20th century, the idea of a common culture was to be generally replaced by the creation of specialist élites. Democracy was no longer seen as sharing in a common range of reference but rather as a provision of access to those élite groups. So, Kiberd concludes, today, the aspiration is usually towards the inclusion of gifted individuals in the dominant part of the structure, rather than the revolutionary transformation of social relations.

This is very close to what was diagnosed by George Davie in his books, *The Democratic Intellect* (1961) and *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (1986). Davie analysed the decline of the educational ideal of being a student of all the main branches of human culture, and the rise instead of categorical specialisation, which would deliver a world in which no-one talks to each other and there is no touching. Specialised expertise is necessary, but it must be grounded, earthed, in a democracy of human understanding, a general sense of what it is to be human. In his appreciation of Davie in *The Herald* (28 March 2007), Lindsay Paterson asked: “Who, inspecting the details of our educational curricula, or the quality of our media, or the banality of our political discourse, could not feel acutely that Davie was prescient? But, by having taught and having written, he has also ensured that an older and more distinguished tradition would remain available to us – a belief that intellectual rigour, more widely practised than seems possible today, is democracy’s only secure basis.”

We want to see that tradition realised in an independent Scotland. There is hope for it here. The worst of what has been described by Kiberd and Davie is what we want to help bring to an end, because the current situation is exactly what *Ulysses*, and Davie, and all great art, oppose: a stranglehold over educational, social and media institutions of all sorts, and a specialist stranglehold over Joyce and so many other so-called “difficult” writers, poets, artists or composers. That’s especially true in the world of the visual arts, where the élite groups are totally commercialised. How do we break that down?

The first thing is to act according to your priorities, once you’re sure of what they are, but modestly, silently, with cunning, and in exile from the “central powers” or management, whatever authority is in charge. Make it evident to those you are among what your priorities

are and how they can be realised in personal and local terms, not through ordination from on high. Use every opportunity the days bring. An openness to serendipity allows teachers and artists and writers and anyone, really, to renew styles and themes in every work, and in every generation. “Cease to strive,” Leopold Bloom advises Stephen Dedalus. Or as Ed Dorn puts it, “My motto is: / Achieve the inevitable.” It is not through “growing the economy” or “striving for excellence” or “working for progress” that you get anywhere at all. All good teaching is mainly asking questions.

Why?

“Democracy educates and education democratises.” Otherwise, both fail. Once again, Declan Kiberd reminds us of the relation between social transformation and artistic change, revolutions in form: “Most writers believe that by changing language and style you may in time alter thought; and that by altering thought you may transform the world itself. The painters who worked alongside Joyce in Paris believed that they might yet challenge other media as exponents of the dominant visual form.”

Kiberd says that they lost that battle to film, television and the music video – yet it is not true that they failed entirely. Kiberd says that Joyce issued a similar challenge to newspapers and didn’t completely fail, and that is true. Witness *The National*. In any case, the challenge itself, with regard to any great artist, is far from preposterous. Anyone who has been deeply engaged in the works of great artists is changed by that experience, because great art has things that matter to give us, any one of us. All great art is on the side of humanity. Yet the ideals of democracy in the social structures that give access to the arts must have effect for the arts to realise that gift, and for people to receive it.

And this is keyed to national identity, because through that, social structures are generated.

But what is the reality of democracy in Scotland?

The saturation of society by technology and mass media has had a transformational effect. It may be that the people of a country are less able now than ever to absorb and enjoy, to take to their hearts, the great works of major poets and artists, simply because they have less critical information about them. Generations ago access was denied because of mass illiteracy and ignorance. Now there is much more widespread literacy and easier access to knowledge, but people are blocked from details and the practise of critical value by mediating walls of conventional and formulaic cliché. Screen media is screening and information technology is misinforming. That’s a rather pessimistic thought as regards the arts, but it has a parallel consequence regarding participatory democracy.

In England in the 21st century, the NHS is being privatised, commercialised, sold off to the market economy. Scotland is trying to keep the egalitarian ideal of democratic health

provision as a birthright. Isn't that just as important for the arts? So the question then becomes, at what point did the balance tip from seeing the value of the arts as humanly worthwhile, to allowing them to be at the beck and call of commercial priorities, market forces, the ethic of "what sells is good"?

That ethic is opposed to democracy because it prioritises making money over human beings as thinking and sentient creatures. It endorses the "material" and denigrates or liquidates the "immaterial" upon which human well-being depends.

Michael Fry, in his history of Scotland 1815-1914, *A New Race of Men* (2013), admirably gives significant space to the arts – architecture, painting, literature, philosophy – as well as economics and social history. He sees them as essential in the stories of the people who have lived in this nation. When he comes to the late 19th-century "kailyard" writers of popular, sentimental stories of small-town Scotland with inbuilt moral reassurance and sweet nostalgic warmth on every page, he recognises that there are depths and complexities in some of their works, but he makes this important speculation: "Perhaps for structural reasons, in the nature of the literary market rather than the quality of the literary product, Scotland was already being suffocated by the imposition of British norms," and he says that this was to be another feature of the 21st-century as well. Now, with "North British" haggis, strawberries and shortbread, the point remains pertinent.

Scott, Hogg, Galt and Stevenson, the major Scottish writers of the 19th century, were not "limited by any pandering to their readers." They "did not give us a static Scotland", as many "kailyard" writers did. The great writers made fictions "that they knew would challenge their readers, so these might out of the encounter change their ideas about their country. It was a high standard for successors to try to live up to, and the general state of Scottish culture did not always favour it – then or now."

The purpose of writers and artists is not to manufacture comfort. As Ezra Pound says, "the arts give us our best data for determining what sort of creature man is." Man and woman, human kind. That data is valuable. Without it, your health will be bad and your weakness grow profound. So the arts are essential to democracy.

A fair democratic representation of the people depends on the number of people who vote in a constituency. All the constituencies in the United Kingdom deliver the vote for central government. In this structure, Scots will always be outvoted.

If you believe in the democratic unity of Britain, Scots will always be outvoted. Why should we oppose this? Because the cultural distinction of Scotland means that the people of Scotland have their own distinctive priorities. Who cares about these priorities? In the state structure of the United Kingdom, the people who live in Scotland and care most about Scotland and the lives of their families and friends and neighbours will always be outvoted. Always. Because in the United Kingdom there are around five million people in Scotland and

55 million people in England. The vote that put Thatcher in power, the vote to take us out of the European Union, were the results of functioning democracy. No-one in Scotland has an argument against that unless you believe there should be a separate state in which we can vote for whoever we choose, within Scotland. The gulf between rich and poor is a direct result of this UK “democracy” and it applies to knowledge of the arts every bit as much as to money.

Cultural distinction defines democratic representation. That’s why it’s crucial for the education of people. In our essays in *The National* on the artists, the Scottish women painters, John Bellany, JD Fergusson, and most recently Neel, Gillies and Maxwell, in John Purser’s articles on the neglected Scottish composers, and in the essays on the poets and writers, we’ve tried to introduce something of the range and calibre of some of Scotland’s cultural production. It’s an open world. There’s a lot more to take in. This is just the beginning.