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of a Familiar Refrain

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Abstract

This essay promotes a cultural historiography distinguished by disruption and dispersal, one suspicious of the need to negotiate with overarching continuities embodied by ‘nation’ or ‘tradition’. In order to do so, it borrows from Foucault’s archaeological methodology and from modern folklore studies as conceived by Hamish Henderson. Featuring authors ranging through Hugh MacDiarmid, Cecil Day-Lewis, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, James Barke, J. D. Scott, Robin Jenkins, Muriel Spark, and Robin Robertson, it comprises a survey of allusions to the song ‘The Flowers of the Forest’ across modern literature. In advocating for a decentred methodology, focussed on gaps, discontinuities, entanglements, and replacements, it is hoped that the erasure and distortion of larger continuities – such as the national tradition – can be circumvented in favour of more radically disruptive studies of power and cultural currency.

In his response to the predominance of cultural-historical narratives that position the interwar Scottish literary renaissance as a precursor to the political project of the 2014 Independence Referendum, Alex Thomson challenges literary historians to ‘find modes which do not sublimate the critical questioning of artworks into the production of national culture’.¹ This essay posits one way of circumventing the kinds of continuity – national, genre, period, or tradition, for example – that are often relied upon in literary history, whether simply as critical context, or as foils for more totalising, or more precise sets of critical parameters. In recent years, scholars in Scottish literary studies have provided many models for cutting across such tensions, through foci such as: narratives of devolution, contested and overlapping forms of community, cosmopolitanism and parochialism, world literature, world systems theory, cultural nationalism, revisionist periodisation, and essentialism.² Each of these approaches foregrounds the difficulty that comes with giving shape to phenomena that refuse to cohere without significant compromise – in eliding difference, relying too heavily on unmoored abstractions, or else overemphasising

the less interesting aspects of a text in order to give it a home. This essay, a study of the suggestive recurrences of the song ‘The Flowers of the Forest’ in modern literature – in all their variation and incommensurability – explores the possibility of relieving the critic of the responsibility to contain and fix meaning in service of, or opposition to, the national framework, or any other mode that might risk dehistoricising our literature by collapsing it into long-established continua.

Between 1755 and 1769 the old air, ‘The Flowers of the Forest’, was provided with three lyrical sets authored by genteel poets, peers and correspondents of the Enlightenment-era literati, who all knew one another. They were Alison Cockburn [*née* Rutherford] (1713–1794), Jean Elliot (1727–1805), and Anne Hunter [*née* Home] (1742/3–1821). Each of their ‘song remediations’ – Maureen N. McLane’s term – were received with such enthusiasm that they ‘passed into the oral tradition as if unauthored’.³ Thomas Crawford, in his 1979 study *Society and the Lyric*, sketched out the histories of each lyrical set and struck upon their remarkable variety. Perhaps the most familiar now is Elliot’s, which was said to have been written as part of a wager (for a pair of gloves or a set of ribbons, depending on who you read) in which her brother (or her father) challenged her to write a ballad in the authentic style commemorating the Battle of Flodden (1513) and, in particular, the young men of Selkirkshire – the titular ‘Forest’ – lost to it.⁴ The resultant song takes as its opening line and its refrain the only lyrics that were thought to have survived from a much earlier incarnation:

I’ve heard of a liling at our ewe’s milking
The flowers of the forest that are wede away.⁵

Crawford describes a popular assumption that found purchase after its publication in David Herd’s *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs* (1769): that it was in fact a great deal older and might even date to within living memory of the battle itself.⁶ He summarises its appeal in those terms: ‘Its inspiration is patriotic and antiquarian; its language is Scots; and it is shot through with that nostalgia which has coloured Scottish attitudes to lost causes from that day to this.’⁷ Cockburn’s set, likely written before Elliot’s, employs a more polite register and begins ‘I’ve seen the smiling of fortune beguiling’. Walter Scott understood its subject to be the depopulation of the Ettrick Forest, while Robert Chambers took it as a lamentation for the bankruptcy of several Selkirkshire lairds during that period.⁸ Crawford describes its inspiration

as 'local', though adaptable enough to appeal to 'any disaster involving the death or exile of a community's leaders'.⁹ Hunter's set features a still more rarefied lexicon, beginning, 'Adieu, ye streams that smoothly glide / Through mazy windings o'er the plain'. Crawford explains that it is 'entirely personal': 'a lament, not for a local community or a nation's chivalry, but for one young man who has been drowned'.¹⁰

One song is, then, professedly national in its lamentation for the war-dead; one is local, more particular to a landscape and community; and one is entirely personal. Nevertheless, Crawford insists that all three are 'national songs'. And it is an accolade borne out by the inclusion of Elliot's and Cockburn's sets in Herd's *Scottish Songs*, and Scott's *Minstrelsy* (1802–1803), and by all three sets in Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* (1787–1803). It should also be noted that the air enjoys its own cultural currency: as a pipe lament, it is still performed across the British Commonwealth, commemorating sacrifice among the armed forces. In this capacity, its power to broadcast a phlegmatic, memorialising grief, is underscored by its possible implication in the prerogatives of capital and empire. Without lyrics to particularise, the loss it conveys seems more perennial, even inevitable. And it is difficult to discern whether it carries radical potential in this context – reminding us of the senselessness of loss, how disconnected are the cause and the cost – or if it submits even more readily to the logic of the 'nobility of sacrifice'. Crawford's survey of the eighteenth-century lyrical sets, and the connection the air has to the Battle of Flodden and to the Great War in the modern consciousness, as well as these interpretative ambiguities at the level of melody, illustrate the suitability of this song as a nexus for the study of cultural history through discourse analysis. The refrain is reconstituted with startling variety: from these earliest surviving lyrical sets, through allusions in Scott's *Marmion* (1808), late nineteenth-century melodramas and religious tracts, and, in the twentieth century, in MacDiarmid, Day-Lewis, Gibbon, Barke, J. D. Scott, Jenkins, Spark, and Robin Robertson.

As Crawford alludes to in his description of Elliot's 'Flowers of the Forest', there is, in such eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century 'song remediations', the suggestion that it is possible to literally re-create an 'ancient' and therefore 'authentic' voice. Consider the notion, for example, that Elliot extrapolated or intuited her way (from two surviving lines) to lyrics first conceived when the Battle of Flodden was in living memory. To articulate that possibility too directly is to devalue the kind of 'authenticity' that is given so high a premium here: that which signifies a text's relationship with the moment in which its subject and form first found expression.

What results is a paradox akin to the ‘uncanny valley’: the more convincing one’s approximation, the more it destabilises the metric by which that quality is measured.

Elliot’s set displays an awareness of this tension in its use of the surviving refrain. In each stanza, the penultimate line, which introduces a form of ‘The flowers of the forest are a’ wede away’, puts this statement in the mouths of the ‘lasses a-tilting’. And, in many published versions, both ‘flowers’ and ‘forest’ are capitalised. In a sense, the song thereby cites itself, and enacts that characteristic double-temporality that is taken to typify traditional, or oral, literatures – it signifies a dual process of accumulation and perpetuation. Like ‘tradition’ more broadly conceived, it is both finite (in the sense that it is complete) *and* open to near infinite extension (it can be ‘remediated’). In describing the setting for the singing of ‘The Flowers of the Forest’, Elliot’s song catalogues a series of everyday contexts and describes the absence that this lament seems to fill. There is no more wooing, coaxing, blethering, swaggering, or showing off. In lieu of all that is this dirge, of which we only overhear a single line: ‘The flowers of the forest are a’ wede away.’ The line is held at a distance; it appears in implied quotations marks. In the classic ballad mould, repetition awards the line an incantatory power, but it also alludes to another life for this image outside of the narrative world of the song. In this way, Elliot’s ‘remediation’ encapsulates something of our inherited assumptions about cultural tradition, especially when refracted through the nation. Namely, that it appeals to a sense of continuity: it was ever thus, it still is, and it always will be. It reveals the ways in which the relationship between a cultural history gleaned from texts (characterised by fragmentariness and contradiction) and this dim, intangible sense of continuity, is difficult to track precisely. The echoes, feedback loops, and resonances cannot be corralled into a discernible or repeatable logic.

In *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (2008), McLane takes her cue from one of the sets of ‘The Flowers of the Forest’ to elaborate this point:

Anne Home Hunter bids adieu to streams that smoothly glide through mazy windings – and perhaps we should bid adieu to a reification of our literary-theoretical streams. Tunes and texts travel semi-independently, converging and diverging [...] Yet the most successful verbal setts to old airs could enter a feedback loop into oral tradition, their author, even if once known, soon forgotten.¹¹

The purpose of this essay, then, is to try a path of *more* resistance in navigating such 'mazy windings' than that proffered by the smoothly gliding streams of a linear, processional, or even causal understanding of literary and folk traditions. It is to plot convergences and divergences, not to reify a larger host process, but in order to understand more fully the distortions that attend that kind of interpretative imposition.

The earliest record of the air for 'The Flowers of the Forest' resides in the John Skene of Halyards Manuscript (c. 1615–1625). However, in the variety of forms and applications in which we have inherited it the imagined historical reaches of this song tend not to be curtailed by this first trace of material documentation. Instead, antecedents are inferred, and the circumstances of the song's various (re)compositions are speculated upon, just as Crawford surveyed. Such suppositions upon so-called 'ancestor ballads' were also typical of Hamish Henderson's approach to folklore scholarship, though, he was less interested in singular origins than in a diversity of adaptation and proliferation. He elaborated a theory of cultural transmission that situated everything nominally 'literary' as flotsam atop a vast and substantially anonymous flow of folk culture. Alec Finlay has described the best of his critical writings on such ideas as constituting a 'Scottish companion to the radical experimental [...] archaeologies of Michel Foucault'.¹² In the present essay, this claim is taken at face value: the methods described in Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and practised by Henderson are applied, in turn, to an analysis of 'The Flowers of the Forest'. When Henderson read, he did so with the interpretative apparatus of the folklorist rather than that of the literary critic. He followed up on potential sources and their sources in turn, measured the convergence and divergence of phrases, fragments, motifs, without seeking out a definitive or limiting account of that complex of what Foucault would describe as 'gaps, discontinuities, entanglements, incompatibilities, replacements, and substitutions'.¹³ The modern folklorist's work demands humility in the face of an immense field of potential connections.¹⁴ Compare this characteristic sensitivity to contingency and difference, to the vast horizons and unitary vision of an earlier school of ballad scholarship as literary criticism in Francis James Child, and his entry on 'Ballad Poetry' from *Johnson's Universal Cyclopaedia* (1900):

The condition of society in which a truly national or popular poetry appears explains the character of such poetry. It is a condition in which the people

are not divided by political organization and book-culture into markedly distinct classes, in which consequently there is such community of ideas and feelings that the whole people form an individual. Such poetry, accordingly, while it is in its essence an expression of our common human nature, and so of universal and indestructible interest, will in each case be differenced by circumstances and idiosyncrasy. On the other hand, it will always be an expression of the mind and heart of the people as an individual, and never of the personality of individual men.¹⁵

This is, by contemporary standards, an unusually overt example of the broad sweep of history, tradition and nation which erases difference or else reconciles it to its overarching project. And the ideological stakes are put into sharp relief by Child's claim to an historicist insight. These classless societies, where 'the people' were indivisible and never plural, have left us only a poetic inheritance with which to conjure that romantic unity. Its survival and its continued appeal must, therefore, either speak to our innate desire to return to that state, or a melancholic acknowledgment of the insurmountable distance between our present and that antediluvian idyll. In either case, we are forced to identify which state of affairs is the continuum and which the aberration. Child's statement is, despite its extraordinary reach, typical of a set of methodological assumptions that are more often implicit: a part of the internal logic of literary criticism in some of its historical forms.

The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault's only purely methodological volume, was intended to challenge the mythos of origins, the sovereignty of teleological horizons, and the demand for constant recourse to a constituent subject. All of these pressures Foucault designates as appeals to a kind of transcendental continuity, which he sought to replace with a mode of discourse analysis that prioritises, even *produces*, rupture and difference:

We must renounce all those themes whose function is to ensure the infinite continuity of discourse and its secret presence to itself in the interplay of a constantly recurring absence. We must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears, and in that temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten,

transformed, utterly erased, and hidden, far from all view, in the dust of books. Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs.¹⁶

Few fields seem so structurally reliant on the spectre of a 'constantly recurring absence' as folklore studies: the continuity of tradition is conjured to fill the space, or the 'absence', between discrete 'variations' as and when they arise or are otherwise 'discovered'. Even where convergences are fairly well documented, as in the case of the three eighteenth-century lyrical sets for 'The Flowers of the Forest', the assumption of continuity as the larger theme within which a degree of variation and adaptation can be permitted, is an interpretative imposition – a function of the established discourse of that field. Prior to the passage cited above, Foucault describes a sense of the 'already-said' that is, at the same time, 'not said'. This is one of the mechanisms through which it is supposed that 'everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in that semi-silence that precedes it, which continues to run obstinately beneath it, but which it covers and silences.'¹⁷ Henderson's reflections on the 'carrying stream' of the 'folk process' might be understood in similar terms: it is a name for what is undiscoverable in its totality, but by naming it and identifying it when we encounter it, we find ourselves effacing the very phenomena we were trying to describe.

These resonances between the work of the folklorist and the philosopher's critical analysis of modernity, are relevant to modern Scottish literary studies insofar as they encourage a renewed focus on what Foucault called 'irruptions'. That is, on the sudden and isolated emergence of a statement that is to be understood on its own terms outside of the expectations of continuity given to any particular host discourse. In literary history and folklore studies, this means eschewing 'tradition' as a relational metaphor for a view more oriented towards the principle of 'dispersal'. In the case of 'The Flowers of the Forest', this essay contends that it ought not to be read, for example, as a timeless ideal of sacrifice and endurance (in national, local, or personal terms) that *finds* renewed signification and expression through diverse and successive iterations. That reading might provide us with a convenient synecdoche for the complex of change and continuity which is thought to characterise a national consciousness; but in meekly conceding to those terms it fails to make the designation useful. By reading in terms of singular irruptions the arbitrariness of

the connections we make can stand without accumulating so much symbolic weight that they collapse into incoherence, and without stretching their significance so thin that they become transparent.

This is not about the slow march of a 'tradition' that sorts (absorbs and reconciles, or else erases) all cultural artefacts in its path. It is not an effort to plot a narrow, singular trajectory through various epochs of Scottish literary history in order to make some claim for continuity *in* adaptability. Foucault explains:

It [the archaeological method] is trying to deploy a dispersion that can never be reduced to a single system of differences, a scattering that is not related to absolute axes of reference; it is trying to operate a decentring that leaves no privilege to any centre [...] its task is to make differences: to constitute them as objects, to analyse them, and to define their concept.¹⁸

This is best understood, in Foucault's work, at the level of the 'statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence', which he refines but never quite defines in the course of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.¹⁹ The statement is, in this conception, not a 'structure', but a 'function that cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents, in time and space.'²⁰ In this sense 'The flowers of the forest are a' wede away' could be read in similar terms to Foucault's example statement, 'The golden mountain is in California', or those he borrows from other philosophers: Russell's 'The present king of France is bald', and Chomsky's 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously'.²¹ The remainder of this essay is concerned with readings of 'The Flowers of the Forest' in several of its irruptions, predominantly in the twentieth century. The song's refrain is particularly susceptible to readings that serve the notion of an overarching cultural tradition. It is easy to imagine, for example, a version of this essay that plots its iterations as a recurrent dialogue between various national pasts and presents. Nevertheless, this essay will conclude that a decentred and dispersed reading can provide a template for work that, by embracing arbitrary connections through history, is freed from negotiating its relationship with such overarching continuities.

In 1828 'The Flowers of the Forest' lent its title to Margaret Graves Derenzy's collection of 'instructive' verse for children, and was stripped of any darker resonances it might have held for its adult readership: the preface explains that the forest was

where the poet-mother and her child lived, and the flowers were the poems that were written and shared in that place.²² Around the same time, another children's author, Mary Martha Sherwood, published a moralistic religious prose narrative with the same title (1830), in which the death of an angelic and pious orphan inspires the conversion to Protestantism of an older Catholic interlocutor. In this context, the Church of God on Earth is likened to a garden full of beautiful flowers.²³ The forest signifies an untamed element: an opportunity for evangelism and conversion. After that, *The Flowers of the Forest* re-emerged in the form of John Baldwin Buckstone's play (1852), a pastoral melodrama set in Cumbria, which details a young lord's repeated encounters with a band of 'gypsies' – the titular 'flowers of the forest' – and features a whipping, an aborted wedding, a duel, a murder, a trial, a suicide, several instances of fortune-telling, many disguises, and a troubling plot device that rests on ideas of racial 'purity'.²⁴ At the turn of the twentieth century (1900), Annie Shepherd Swan – writing under the pseudonym, David Lyall – produced a novel under the same title, which recounts the travails in love and war of an aristocrat officer during the Boer War.²⁵ John van Druten would later produce a play (1934), with an epigraph lifted from Elliot's lyrics, which advocated in vivid terms a pacifist revisionism of the First World War. Set both in the present day of the 1930s and, through flash-backs, in 1916, its tragic young hero is stricken with tuberculosis, and, in his delirious state, becomes a channel for the grievances of the war-dead. Fragments of poetry that were never recovered, but that were composed in the trenches in the moments before death, erupt from him in dramatic seizures.²⁶ We could add to this brief potted history of titles: a Stephen Southwold novel (published under 'Neil Bell') (1952); David Garnett's memoir, an insider's portrait of the Bloomsbury Group during the War years (1955); a Joseph Hone spy novel (1980); occasional historical romances set around Flodden or else the Jacobite Rebellion (Byrd 1962; MacDougall 1981; Carew 2007); and Trevor Royle's popular history of Scotland during the First World War (2006). The diversity of this survey, I hope, reaffirms the aptness of an 'irruptive' approach.

MacDiarmid would include Elliot's lyrical set in *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Verse* (1941), nestled between a translated extract from George Buchanan's (1505–1582) Latin elegy, 'Of the Sad Lot of the Humanists in Paris', and the folk song, 'The Blades of Harden', by balladeer-poet and journalist, Will H. Ogilvie (1869–1963).²⁷ The Buchanan excerpt laments the exhausted Muses and the mortifying struggle

for creation in the life of the artist. The Ogilvie song had first featured as a set-piece in the long narrative poem-sequence, *Whaup o' the Rede: A Ballad of the Border Raiders* (1909). Elliot's lyrics are, therefore, placed between two cultural axes: the Scottish poem as an artefact of pan-European intellectual developments, and the more provincial recreation of the internecine conflicts along the nation's border. The 'Flowers of the Forest' answers the creative impasse described in the Latin poem with the deaths of a generation of young men, and with a 'feedback loop' that connects specifically with the war-dead of the elder poet's own time and place, as if to offer a corrective to the intellectualism and artistry of the humanist tradition. It is worth noting too that Buchanan – as a historian – had, in *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* (1582), his 'stately narrative of the nation's destinies', done much to promote what would become a commonplace view of Flodden: 'the mingled grief and shame and indignation which the memory of that day awoke in every Scotsman.'²⁸ Elliot's words, lamenting the national tragedy of Flodden, are followed by a reiving song, invoking a state of sustained – if intermittent – conflict stretching from the Wars of Independence to the first Jacobite Rebellion.²⁹

MacDiarmid made direct use of the central refrain of 'The Flowers of the Forest' in the opening stanzas of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926):

Sic transit gloria Scotiae – a' the floo'ers
O' the Forest are wede awa'. (A blin' bird's nest
Is aiblins biggin' in the thistle tho'? ...
And better blin' if 'ts brood is like the rest!)³⁰

Part of the drunk man's preliminary tirade against the state of Scottish culture and the hobbled consciousness of the Scottish people (the 'feck'), this passage introduces the protracted attack on the Burns cult. And it follows the poem's first clear declaration of intent, in which the speaker describes his starting point ('[...] I maun begin / Wi' what's still deemed Scots and the folk expect'), his destination ('[...] heichts whereo' the fules ha'e never recked.'). his purpose ('[...] I'll whummle them / And souse the cratures'), and his reasoning ('For it's nae choice, and ony man su'd wish / To dree the goat's weird tae as weel's the sheep's!'). The Latin is an adaptation of a well-worn phrase with a broader application, 'Thus passes the glory of the world',³¹ and this invocation of the reliably transitory nature of

worldly things – even Scotland – is well elaborated by the 'Flowers of the Forest', as the hyphen between them suggests. As the earlier lines state, no discriminating choice is possible – neither the redeemed (the sheep) nor the damned (the goats) can be ignored, however they have been sorted. The way forward is therefore difficult, and perhaps impossible, to discern. Scotland's glory passes, like everything else. The flowers of the forest seem to be 'wede awa' in perpetuity. The blind bird who builds her nest in the discomfort of the thistles is fortunate not to be able to see her 'brood' make the same mistakes. The impasse, ironically, reproduces and proliferates. This opening section of MacDiarmid's poem reaches the depressing conclusion that another Burns, or another Christ, would only 'cheenge folks' talk but no' their natures.³² Here, then, the 'The Flowers of the Forest' emerges as a symbol of atrophy experienced as a cycle. This singular irruption signifies that which the archaeological approach might, at least in methodological terms, free us from.³³

In his 1935 collection, *A Time to Dance*, Cecil Day-Lewis would also recontextualise 'The Flowers of the Forest', overtly experimenting with the ways in which matching verses from distant epochs and in divergent modes reframes our interpretative efforts. Under the innocuous title, 'Two Songs', Day-Lewis arranges successive modern English versions of Elliot's lyrical set and Christopher Marlowe's 'The Passionate Shepherd to his Love' (1599). The 'yowe-milking' is exchanged for 'loom and belting'; 'Flodden' for 'Flanders'; and, perhaps most importantly, the grief ('dool') and woe ('wae') that meets the order sending 'our lads to the Border', is replaced with curses and anger at the 'medalled commanders' and 'the promise that takes our men from us'. The effect is a more class-oriented inflection, a focus on sustenance and survival under capitalism – 'from wooing and winning, from owning or earning / The flowers of the forest are all turned away'. Marlowe's pastoral idyll is satirically gutted in favour of a focus on precariousness and mere survival as the promise of the 'passionate' speaker. His love is assured of 'chance employment', 'a wreath of wrinkles', feet 'shod with pain', 'toil', and 'hunger' only. All possible reference to the prelapsarian world of Marlowe's original is rendered absurd.³⁴ If an inherited cultural tradition – as represented by the Elizabethan playwright-poet, and the eighteenth-century songstress – counts for anything in this context, it is as a fig-leaf for power and the exploitation and destitution it perpetuates.

In Gibbon's *Sunset Song* (1932), 'The Flowers of the Forest' features at three near-equidistant points. Closely following the much-cited 'two Chrisses' passage,

the first instance marks a pivot away from the community voice advancing well-worn conceptions of the national past in the popular imagination, toward a more pained investigation of grief and loss at the level of the community, which, it is suggested, might lead to poetry:

But everybody knew that the English were awful mean [...] the English were beaten in all the wars, except Flodden and they won at Flodden by treachery again, just as told in *The Flowers of the Forest* [...] And she wrote an essay on that, telling all how it happened, the Dominic said it was fine and that sometime she should try to write poetry [...]³⁵

The paragraph that follows puts short shrift to this proposition with the traumatic birth of the twins. The second irruption occurs towards the end of the wedding ceilidh, after the songs of Long Rob and others, and just before ‘Auld Lang Syne’ brings in the New Year. Elliot’s lyrics are introduced by a description of the scene, in which Chris, ‘young and earnest’, is observed by her new husband, ‘solemn and proud’. These qualities seem to speak of how helplessly unprepared they are for the fruition of the promise of those lyrics. In its first two iterations, the song clearly prefigures the losses of the War, but this does not foreclose more nuanced readings. As Chris finishes the song, Chae interjects, complaining ‘we’ll all have the whimsies if we listen to any more woesome songs!’ As a socialist he represents a form of historical consciousness that seeks to mobilise in order to preclude such traumas, rather than wallow in sentimentalism. However, this only prompts Chris to think, in an abstracted and extrahistorical manner, of the ‘sadness of Scotland’s singing, made for the sadness of the land and sky’. The dreamy spell of Chris’ mode of historical consciousness – certainly compassionate, but not bestowing agency on humanity in its drift through deep-time – is broken again by Chae, who calls for another dance and reminds the party that midnight is fast approaching.³⁶

In the final irruption, after the inscription on the Standing Stone, and the minister’s speech at the memorial dedication, the musical notation of ‘The Flowers of the Forest’ is embedded in descriptions of the movement of light and sound across the landscape: ‘the dark was near, it lifted your hair and was eerie and uncanny’; ‘[the pipe lament] rose and rose and wept and cried [...] leaping up the moor and echoing across the loch’; and the final lines:

[...] the dark had come and began to stream down the hill [...] they'd the last of the light with them up there, and maybe they didn't need it or heed it, you can do without the day if you've a lamp quiet-lighted and kind in your heart.³⁷

These elements are bound up in the promise of the titular 'Sunset Song'. The 'morning star' of Revelations 2:28, which gives the minister's speech its title, stands for the promise of an end of history that is endlessly deferred. This idealism, and the endurance, sacrifice, and resignation it demands, is wrought as the only solution to the seemingly simple truths explored in the minister's dedication: that 'nothing abides'; that the struggles of the past brought them to the 'new oppressions and foolish greeds' of the present; and that, nevertheless, the struggle must go on. This is memorialisation as historical consciousness: marking the displacements of modernity with an eye on the deferral, and therefore the ultimate futility, of the impulse. As acts of remembrance, the abstraction of the 'Last of the Peasants, the last of the Old Scots folk'; the Stone whose formerly fluid meaning is fixed by this ceremony; and the pipe lament echoing across the landscape, cannot help but reify an homogeneous 'sacrifice' narrative. Jingoist patriotism is admirably foregone in favour of an anarcho-primitivist kind of land-worship, but this does not provide a way out of the depersonalisation that characterises such memorialising practices. In this irruption, 'The Flowers of the Forest' fails to engage in history by redirecting that sense of injustice at its rightful source: the beneficiaries of feudalism and/or capitalism, depending on which conflict we isolate: Flodden or the First World War. Though young Ewan would come to pursue those ends in *Grey Granite* (1934), the models of historical consciousness that gather around this song in *Sunset Song* are outstripped by history in the latter two volumes of *A Scots Quair*.³⁸

'The Flowers of the Forest' also exemplifies old songs that have given way to new in both Barke's *The Land of the Leal* (1939) and J. D. Scott's *The End of an Old Song* (1954).³⁹ Barke's novel is an overt appeal to the kinds of totalising continuities that the irruptive method looks to dispel. In five 'books', it follows the Ramsay family through two generations and successive relocations: from the Rhins of Galloway, through the landed estates of the Borders and Fife, and, finally, to the shipyards of the Clyde. It opens with Tom Gibson (Jean Ramsay's father): 'The world was old, very old. Many seasons of sowing and harvest had come and gone since the days of Isaac and of Abraham.' A few lines later the 'Dragon of Capital' – the

‘modern machine-made dragon’ – emerges as a distant spectre, melding the idioms of myth, scripture, and modernity, and, like Gibbon, invoking broad sweeps of history made up of both ancient stasis and modern transformation.⁴⁰ The third book, titled ‘Border Ballad’, begins with the chapter ‘Flowers of the Forest’, and it describes the family’s life on the Selkirkshire estate of Sir Charles Montgomery Laidlaw-Scott. In this context, the title maintains a fairly versatile application to the events of the novel: it may refer to David Ramsay’s enjoyment of the actual flowers of the forest during his work as assistant to the estate’s gardener and forester;⁴¹ it might chime with the history of the old landed families of the Borders, much discussed by David and Sir Charles;⁴² it might be a sardonic reference to the diverse cast of estate workers – the ‘burley jovial’ ‘Rabelaisian’ gamekeeper and his ‘cheery and inconsequential wife’, the violent and abusive gardener, his ‘dirty slut’ wife, and their son, the lustful ‘sadistic pervert’.⁴³ It also returns us to a variation of Gibbon’s ‘last of the Old Scots folk’. From Sir Charles’ perspective, the Ramsays are ‘a different breed’ who ‘have their independence but, by God [...] have their manners’. They are a ‘kind [who] are dying out’ as modernity, and the proletarians of the tweed mills in particular, encroach.⁴⁴ ‘The Flowers of the Forest’ resurfaces one more time in the novel, as a pipe lament at the funeral of Captain Angus Donald Blair Stewart Carsewell.⁴⁵ Here, the song is stripped of the creative ambiguity that arises from the succession of meanings-in-context of the earlier chapter, and is fixed in the codified idiom of a military funeral (where metaphor functions in direct equivalences, as a closed circuit).

J. D. Scott’s novel takes its title and its epigraph from James Ogilvy, Lord Chancellor, and Earl of Seafield (1664–1730), on the signing of the Treaty of Union in 1707: ‘There is the end of an auld sang’.⁴⁶ The novel’s portrait of a friendship, from the 1930s through to the contemporary world of the 1950s, traces the disintegration of old certainties around community, nation, heredity, empire, class, and gender in Scotland and Britain. The point at which ‘The Flowers of the Forest’ briefly features in this bonfire of history-laden constraints, is around the mid-point of the novel, during a conversation on ancestry. Alasdair, whose provenance is either the ‘good old fornicating, gambling proletariat’, or the ‘gambling, fornicating aristocracy’ (his paternity is in question), finds common cause with his old friend Patrick, an artist, ‘solid professional middle class’ in upbringing. Their playful and indulgent exchange describes all that might be wilfully sullied in favour of a mercenary focus on ‘getting ahead’:

'We spit on Bonnie Prince Charlie and Flora MacDonald, on Rizzio's blood and Mary Queen of Scots and the Flowers o' the Forest and Archibald Bell-the-Cat.'

'The end of an auld sang?'

'We spit on great greeny-yellow gobs on the end of an auld sang.'⁴⁷

In this irruption 'The Flowers of the Forest' again resonates with the 'old song' of the title. But here, its significance is flat, it is the historical fodder of an early twentieth-century Scottish education, and it is gleefully defaced for the distraction it represents.

In his much-studied short story, 'Flowers' (1973), Robin Jenkins literally inhabits the imagery of the song's refrain. Set in an area not unlike the estate of Lady Runcie-Campbell of *The Cone-Gatherers* (1955), next to a sea loch and a larch wood somewhere in the West Highlands, during the Second World War, a schoolteacher sends her small class outside to gather flowers. Three fighter planes fly low overhead, and the teacher exclaims 'There they are, children [...]. There are the true flowers of our country, the most precious, the most beautiful.' Margaret wanders from the group and encounters an adder, which she kills with a stick, surprised to see that it too has red blood. She then picks a small yellow flower, having overcome an impulse to trample it. She discovers the bodies of two dead airmen, and just as this realisation occurs: 'In her hand the yellow flower was crushed into a green and black mess.' The bodies are then described: their limbs and faces have been blown off, their bones are exposed, and the piece finishes with Margaret running back to tell the others: 'But as she made to clamber up the bank she became aware of the crushed flower in her hand. Weeping and yelling, she rubbed it madly on the grass.'⁴⁸

These encounters with the adder, the flower, and the airmen, are connected by their quick succession and by the vibrancy of their colours: the patterned green and black of the snake, the 'green and black mess' of the flower, and the suggestion that the carnage of bodies shares this colour combination. With her discovery, Margaret is made complicit in the fact of these deaths. They were prefigured by her assault on the snake, and, in the moment of her discovery, they were echoed in her destroying the flower. In this sense, she does not disturb the scene, but completes it. She inhabits and animates this image of 'The Flowers of the Forest' with her witness.⁴⁹

The self-same project might be extended backward to include *The Cone-Gatherers*. The dramatic events of that novel, though set against the War and punctuated by its

noises and spectres, are entirely contained. If the story of Duror and Calum relates to the broader ideological and global conflict, it is as metonymy, not as synecdoche: it relates to but is apart from that context. (As opposed to Margaret's outsider observer status in the forest, a displaced evacuee in an alien landscape.) The forest's ecosystem comprises both Calum, who imagines himself as an owl suffering the 'ineluctable predicament of necessary pain and death', who is 'as indigenous as a squirrel or a bird', and who identifies with the hunted deer; and Duror, who has a 'tree of revulsion growing in him', who finds comfort in the stoic elm that stands, impervious, in front of his house.⁵⁰ In this sense, they are *of the forest* and their indigeneity naturalises the plot's recurrent rehearsal of the murder-suicide that marks its climax. This is not a violent incursion of the machine age on a rural idyll – it is the continuation of an old struggle in a setting as natural to it as any other. The parallel of trees and people – both felled for the war-effort, and endlessly replaced – is oppressive and ever-present in the novel.⁵¹ Runcie-Campbell recalls her Judge father's comments on sentencing a murderer to death: 'By being born therefore, or even conceived, one became involved'.⁵² Everyone is complicit. The message Neil gives to be passed on to Runcie-Campbell regarding her request for their help, is that 'a man can only surrender so far'. But the novel, as a lengthy exposition on this setting and its metonymic potential, leads us to conclude that we must be prepared to surrender indefinitely. This is the condition that is sustained in this indirect irruption of 'The Flowers of the Forest', always, and endlessly, 'a' wede away'.

Perhaps the most irreverent use of 'The Flowers of the Forest', and the least resistant to the 'irruptive' approach, is that of Jean Brodie. Here, the song does not denote regret over ruptures in old familiar continuities. Rather, it is a cultural signifier that is gleefully manipulated, as if simply to show how easily that can be done. Immediately following our introduction to the set, and the respective sources of their 'fame', and immediately preceding the prolepsis revelation of Mary Macgregor's fate, is Brodie's history lesson under the elm tree:⁵³

'Hugh was killed,' said Miss Brodie, 'a week before the Armistice. After that there was a general election and people were saying "Hang the Kaiser!" Hugh was one of the Flowers of the Forest, lying in his grave.'⁵⁴

At turns interrupted by Sandy's having her sleeves rolled up, by Miss Mackay's first interjection, and by the girls' tears, the 'story of Miss Brodie's felled fiancé' is

adapted in real time to its setting and circumstance. Like Elliot's song that cites itself, Brodie's performance describes and prescribes its reception in context. On 'one of the last autumn days when the leaves were falling in little gusts', Hugh is described as having fallen 'like an autumn leaf'.⁵⁵ At this early point in the novel we have already been told that the girls 'knew the rudiments of astrology but not the date of the Battle of Flodden or the capital of Finland'.⁵⁶ In light of Hugh's later transformations – his coming to resemble one then the other, of Brodie's romantic interests – and countless other comic collisions between fragments of art, culture, science, history, language, and personal circumstance, 'The Flowers of the Forest' simply takes its place among the vast constellation of 'facts' with which Brodie makes her 'patterns'.⁵⁷ The notion of a 'prime' is also important in both Jean Elliot's lyrical set, and Jean Brodie's pedagogy. The history lesson under the elm tree comes out of a lengthy exposition on the virtues of one's 'prime' – 'the moment one was born for' – and it chimes and clashes with Elliot's line 'The prime of our land, are cauld in the clay'. Brodie concedes that 'one's prime is elusive', and the repeated analepsis and prolepsis confirm that it is transient, but there is in her invocation of Elliot's song, a faint suggestion that one's 'prime' might not be revealed except in – if not, after – death. 'There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime.' The final sentence of the novel.

Finally, Robin Robertson's 1997 poem, 'The Flowers of the Forest', serves to disperse the kind of representative heft that the song takes on in many of its earlier irruptions. Part of a sequence on the life and work of David Octavius Hill (1802–1870), an early pioneer of photography in Edinburgh, the poem's speaker 'shoulders' his daughter 'like a set of pipes', and in comforting her, 'counterpoint[s] her crying' with his singing the song's refrain. Hill's second daughter died in infancy. The second and final stanza plays on a superstition around the lament: that in performance it should include a deliberate error lest it bring the piper bad luck:

my cracked reed
blanking
on the high note,
the way a nib runs dry
in the rut it makes,
and splays.⁵⁸

This combination of superstition, the sombre occasion of performance, the image of a parent comforting and/or mourning a child, and the dual description of the limits of expression (in the nib-run-dry and the high note out of range), prompts us to reflect on how quickly art exhausts itself – how contingent and insufficient it is.⁵⁹

The collection to which the piece belongs, Robertson's first, takes its title from Edwin Muir's 'Scotland 1941': *A Painted Field* (1997). However, rather than subscribing to the mythos of a lost 'tribe, a family, a people', and to the image of a post-Reformation wasteland, as detailed by Muir, Robertson's title isolates the fact of cultural memory as mediation. The epigraph to Robertson's volume of selected poems, *Sailing the Forest* (2014), which includes several from *A Painted Field* including 'The Flowers of the Forest', comes from a ballad variously anthologised as 'I Loved a Lass', 'The Forlorn Lover', and 'The False Bride':

*The flowers of the forest they ask of me,
How many strawberries grow in the salt sea?
And I answered to them with a tear in my eye,
How many dark ships sail the forest?*⁶⁰

As a meditation on untranslatability, the riddle helps the collection set the tone for an important recurring theme. As an 'irruption' of 'The Flowers of the Forest', it helps to reinforce the sense of dispersal that has informed this survey. The sea and the forest, and their respective relationships with the speaker, establish a decentred idiom. Literature and song, as discourses, fail to displace the world in all of its contingencies and immensity, and, instead, they speak to 'a dispersion that can never be reduced to a single system of differences'.⁶¹

In some of the irruptions examined above 'The Flowers of the Forest' signifies an effort to manage or resolve the deferral of historical ends, by giving past events a present or future purpose, or by acknowledging and giving a name to the absurdity of that project. In others, it signifies something that no longer signifies anything; it stands for the outmoded, for the dead metaphor. It therefore embraces cultural memory *and* forgetfulness, accumulation *and* erasure. If we are to find a continuity on which all of these irruptions can be plotted, the 'statement' at hand must be abstracted out of usefulness. The modern folklorist's wrestling with the vastness of what Henderson called the 'folk process' and Foucault's insistence on irruption and dispersal as the foundations of discourse analysis help us to recognise

these challenges. Isolating ‘The Flowers of the Forest’ like this, without invoking knowable origins, lineages, or timeless universals, and promoting the notion of irruptive dispersal, illustrates how permeable, even structurally unstable, are the parameters we often chose for our analyses. The purpose of this method is not to dehistoricise our critical practice by isolating passages as though they were philosophical case studies to be examined only for their internal logic, nor is it to stoke up anxieties around competing essentialisms in the struggle to conceive of a ‘Scottish’ literature. It is, rather, an effort to relieve modern Scottish literary criticism from the task of finding the correct (or, least incorrect) spatial or relational metaphor to describe the ‘tradition’ in a national context, and instead, to encourage us to rally around the arbitrariness of our connective and conceptual taxonomies, with all their insufficiencies and limitations.

Notes

- 1 Alex Thomson, ‘From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum? Literature and Critique in Scotland, 1918–2014’, *Journal of Scottish Thought*, 8 (2016), 63–87 (p. 87).
- 2 See Timothy C. Baker, ‘Harmonic Monads: Reading Contemporary Scottish Fiction through the Enlightenment’, *Scottish Literary Review* 9:1 (2017), 95–113; Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller, eds., *Scotland in Theory* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2004); Scott Hames, ‘Narrating Devolution: Politics and/as Scottish Fiction’, *C21Literature* 5:2 (2017); Hames, ‘On Vernacular Scottishness and its Limits: Devolution and the Spectacle of “Voice”’, *Studies in Scottish Literature* 39:1 (2013), 201–22; Scott Lyall (, ed.), *Community in Modern Scottish Literature* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2016); Lyall, ‘New Cosmopolitanism, Democracy and the Place of Scottish Studies’, *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 6:1 (2012), 133–53; Berthold Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009); Juliet Shields, et al, ‘Symposium: Scottish Literature and Periodization’, *Studies in Scottish Literature* 43:1 (2017), 3–45; Alex Thomson, ‘Review Essay: Writers on Scottish Independence’, *Scottish Literary Review*, 5:1 (2013), 129–37; Thomson, “‘You can’t get there from here’”: Devolution and Scottish literary history’, *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 3 (2007).
- 3 Maureen N. McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 110.
- 4 Sarah Tytler and J. L. Watson, *The Songstresses of Scotland*, vol. 1 (London: Strahan, 1871), pp. 204–07.
- 5 As cited by Thomas Crawford, *Society and the Lyric* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979), p. 176.

- 6 In his *Illustrations of the Lyric Poetry and Music of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1853), William Stenhouse states that Elliot's set was published anonymously in 1755, but he does not give any further information (pp. 66–67).
- 7 Crawford, p. 176. It is worth noting that these thoughts on 'lost causes' might have held a particular poignancy in the year of publication, given the failed referendum on a devolved Scottish parliament.
- 8 Ibid, p. 177.
- 9 Crawford, p. 177.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 McLane, p. 110.
- 12 Finlay also extends the international comparisons to the works of Jerome Rothenberg, George Quasha, John Berger, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Alec Finlay, 'A River That Flows On', *Alias MacAlias*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004), p. xxx.
- 13 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 72.
- 14 See Corey Gibson, *The Voice of the People* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2015) for more on Henderson's interpretative methods, and on the humility and contingency that were their foundation.
- 15 Francis James Child, 'Ballad Poetry', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 31:1–3 (1994), 214–22, p. 214. This passage from Child borrows heavily from Herder. In particular, see Johann Gottfried Herder, *Another Philosophy of History and Selected Political Writings*, trans. Ioannis D. Evringenis and Daniel Pellerin, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), pp. 119–120, as cited in Thomson, 'You can't get there from here'. In relation to disciplinary and institutional overlap between folklore studies and literary criticism, it is also worth noting that Child was the first Professor of English appointed to Harvard.
- 16 Foucault, p. 25
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., p. 205.
- 19 Ibid., p. 26.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 86–87.
- 21 Ibid., p. 81, 90.
- 22 Margaret Graves Derenzy, *The Flowers of the Forest* (Wellington: Houlston, 1828).
- 23 Mary Martha Sherwood, *The Flowers of the Forest* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1830).
- 24 John Baldwin Buckstone, *The Flowers of the Forest* (New York: Samuel French, 1852).
- 25 David Lyall, *The Flowers o' the Forest* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1900).
- 26 John van Druten, *Flowers of the Forest* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934).
- 27 Hugh MacDiarmid, ed., *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Verse* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 29–30.
- 28 Peter Hume Brown, *George Buchanan: Humanist and Reformer, A Biography* (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1890), pp. 319–20.
- 29 On MacDiarmid as an editor, see Alan Riach, 'C. M. Grieve/Hugh MacDiarmid, Editor and Essayist', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Scott Lyall and Margery Palmer McCulloch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 36–47.
- 30 Lines 33–36. Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, ed. by Kenneth Buthlay (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p. 6.
- 31 *Sic transit gloria mundi*

- 32 Line 120. MacDiarmid, *Drunk Man*, p. 12.
- 33 For an important precedent study of the use of quotation and allusion in this poem, which includes some reflections on this specific stanza, see Christopher Whyte, 'Construction of Meaning in MacDiarmid's "Drunk Man"', *Studies in Scottish Literature* 23:1 (1988), 199–238.
- 34 Cecil Day-Lewis, *Complete Poems* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992), p. 195–96.
- 35 Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1995), p. 33.
- 36 Ibid. pp. 165–66.
- 37 Ibid. pp. 257–58.
- 38 Critics have long charted the tension between forms of history and myth in Gibbon's trilogy. Most recently, Timothy C. Baker has reframed this as an examination of the productive claims and counter-claims of romance and realism. See 'The Romantic and the Real: James Leslie Mitchell and the Search for a Middle Way', *Journal of Modern Literature* 36:4 (2013), 44–61.
- 39 Both authors have suffered relative critical neglect in recent decades, finding brief mentions usually only in surveys of twentieth-century Scottish literature.
- 40 James Barke, *The Land of the Leal* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1987), pp. 1–2.
- 41 Ibid. p. 259.
- 42 Ibid. pp. 261–64.
- 43 Ibid. pp. 258–59.
- 44 Ibid. p. 261.
- 45 Ibid. p. 418.
- 46 J. D. Scott, *The End of an Old Song* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1990), p. 1.
- 47 Scott, p. 120.
- 48 Robin Jenkins, 'Flowers', *Ten Modern Scottish Stories*, ed. by Robert Millar and John Thomas Low (London: Heinemann, 1973).
- 49 Having been published in the Heinemann collection, 'Flowers' was formerly a staple of high school curricula. In the academy, critical interest in Jenkins' varied oeuvre has been revived and extended beyond *The Cone-Gatherers* (1955), *The Changeling* (1958), and *Fergus Lamont* (1979) in recent years. See Douglas Gifford and Linden Bickett, eds., *The Fiction of Robin Jenkins* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2017).
- 50 Robin Jenkins, *The Cone-Gatherers* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002), p. 9, 18, 88, 18, 37.
- 51 Ibid., Neil, p. 11; Duror, p. 50; Dr Matheson, p. 127.
- 52 Ibid., p. 183.
- 53 This elm tree is not, like Duror's, a symbol of madness and hatred, but serves a far less austere purpose – as cover for Brodie's free-wheeling pedagogy.
- 54 Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 13.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid., p. 6
- 57 Ibid., p. 72. It continues to be a critical mainstay to align this capacity for 'making patterns with facts' with Brodie's narcissism, her fascism, her subversion of Calvinist determinism, and with the struggle for narrative authority that is playfully sent up throughout the novel. See, for example, Bryan Cheyette, 'Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*', in *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel, 1945–2000*, ed. by Brian W. Shaffer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) pp. 367–75; Judy Suh, 'The Familiar Attractions of Fascism in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*', *Journal of Modern Literature* 30:2 (2007), 86–102; and Randall Stevenson, 'The Postwar Contexts of Spark's Writing', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, ed. by Michael Gardiner and

Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 98–109. Thomson borrows this line from Spark's novel in order to describe the tendencies of nationally framed literary historiography and the forms of narratives that are deployed in sustaining it ('You can't get there from here').

58 Robin Robertson, *A Painted Field* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1997), p. 60.

59 David Borthwick discusses Robertson's use of balladry and myth as source material in his piece, "The tilt from one parish / into another": Estrangement, Continuity and Connection in the Poetry of John Burnside, Kathleen Jamie and Robin Robertson, *Scottish Literary Review* 3:2 (2011), 133–48.

60 Robin Robertson, *Sailing the Forest* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), n.p.

61 Foucault, p. 205.

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