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Nationalism and Art: Unanswered Questions

Alan Riach (Friday 29 April 2016)

I attended a conference in Jena, Germany, last week, to deliver a keynote address with the title, “Of Foreigners and Friends”. I arrived on April 20, having been advised that there might be some disruption near the railway station because of a demonstration going on that day. There was. The train stopped a few miles outside of Jena, slowly lurched into a small station named Porstendorf, and stopped. We were told that there was no knowing when it might go on. A group of rather muscular, leather-clad, grim-faced young men got up from the far end of our carriage and marched out, carrying banners and rolled-up flags. We watched them go. One was sporting a Union Jack on his jacket.

It turned out these were pro-fascist Nazi demonstrators, heading for Jena to join the crowds. This happened to be Hitler’s birthday. (He would have been 127.) After a while, and with the kind help of a young émigré Russian, now living in Germany, we got a taxi to take us to the vicinity of the town centre. We walked through a cordon of maybe a dozen police vans, policemen standing all round, armed, flak-armoured and Darth Vader-helmeted. The shouts and chants had gone further down the street.

The following day, the conference got underway. The theme was “Disrespected Neighbours” and talks ranged across Canada/America, India/Pakistan, Romany people in Europe, sectarian Ireland, Polish and British prejudices during the Second World War, Irish/Welsh/English relations in medieval times, and some other things closer to home. In the evening, I got back to my hotel and turned on the TV news: a report on the celebrations in Britain that had been taking place on April 21: the UK Queen’s 90th birthday. How many ironies were layering here? They were all closely connected with the papers and discussions that went on throughout the three-day conference.

Nationalism is so easily equated with fascism, and indeed Nazism. One scholar illustrated his talk with the appalling image from the front page of the Scotland on Sunday supplement (April 7 2013) of silhouetted figures on a hilltop, raising a flag in the blue and white colours of the Saltire, but against the blue background, the white cross was in the shape of the swastika. The caption read, “Klan Alba”, alluding not only to Nazism but also the Ku Klux Klan. My colleagues at the conference, from Germany, Poland, India, Romania, Canada, all over the world, were seriously shocked.

So let's turn it around. How would we show clearly that what we're talking about in Scotland is not conducive to fascism?

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the exclusion of Scottish art from the Edinburgh International Festival resonated for decades with the implication that Scottish art had no international calibre. And the centralisation of the Arts Council in London with a Scottish regional division also emphasised the idea that Scotland was no more than a region. Our institutional education system in Scotland neglected and oppressed Scottish history and literature and the Gaelic and Scots languages (with one exception, Mr Burns), not to mention works of art and music by Scottish artists and composers. But things were changing, and have continued to change, with the establishment of the Saltire Society (1936), the Scottish Arts Council (1967), the Association for Scottish Literary Studies (1970) and the National Theatre of Scotland (2006), and with art galleries established in Orkney (the Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, 1979), in Dundee (Contemporary Arts, 1999), in Lewis (An Lanntair, Stornoway, 2005), the Shetland Museum (Lerwick, 2007). All these initiatives since the Second World War herald new possibilities, new beginnings in particular localities beyond Glasgow and Edinburgh. These institutions, organisations and galleries, sustained by contributions from experts and professionals, were not always there. Yet the legacy of long-standing institutional neglect of, and hostility to, the full inheritance of the arts of Scotland is still with us.

“What is Scottish about Scottish art?” I was asked recently, giving a talk about J.D. Fergusson. “That's got nothing to do with Scotland,” someone said. “It's about colour, rhythm and form. That's all.”

It's the old unionist mantra. All art is universal. Nations don't matter. Especially not Scotland because Britain is what counts (especially England) and Scotland's just a wee toty bit of that.

The real and proper answer is, Hokusai is Japanese, Monet is French, Goya is Spanish, Turner is English. You could go on. So, George Jamesone, William McTaggart, Guthrie, Henry, Mackintosh, the Macdonalds, Margaret and Frances, Fergusson, Cadell, Peplow, Joan Eardley, David Donaldson, Alexander Goudie, John Cunningham, Ruth Nicol, are Scottish: they, and their best work, could have come from nowhere else.

And the key thing is this: each of them has possession in their work of particular aspects of Scotland, which their work gives – I mean, *gives* – to anyone willing and able to look at it, study it, and enjoy it closely.

Someone said to me the other day, but it's good that people are discussing these things!

Well, what's so good about going round in circles with a question that has an answer that once you understand it, means you have to do something about it? Sometimes, discussion is distraction. Go away and discuss these matters while we fill up our offshore bank accounts. Or, to put it more aggressively, "Here's a plastic bag, sonny, away and play at spacemen!"

Great artists are quite normally identified with their nations: Verdi and Wagner, Grieg, Sibelius, Pushkin, Borodin, the French Impressionists. Many were deeply aware of how national cultures interact with one another. Consider Debussy's reaction to German music. Art reflects and represents a nation's self-esteem. Artists present their nation's culture to the world. Think of Italian neo-realist cinema, Satyajit Ray's "Apu" trilogy, Bergman's film visions of Sweden, and Kurosawa's of Japan. And the displaced artists of the 20th century, Stravinsky, Rachmaninov, Schoenberg, Bartok, remain true to themselves by reinventing their national cultures, rejuvenating them, in all their travels and residences. "The Rite of Spring" may be an international paradigm of Modernism in music, yet Stravinsky chose to give it a subtitle: "Pictures of Pagan Russia". These artists and composers aren't "international" Modernists who came from nowhere in particular. National identity is strengthened, enriched and sensitised by the recognition of difference. Its value, purpose and distinction relies upon such difference: foreignness, indeed. And learning about such differences.

Which was the subject of my lecture: "Of Foreigners and Friends".

George Osborne was the Chancellor of the UK's coalition Conservative and Liberal Democrat government when he visited Scotland on February 13, 2014. He was here to tell Scots and the world of his opposition to an independent Scotland, and how his job as he saw it was to stop it coming into existence by ruling out of consideration the prospect of a continuing shared currency between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

Close in on the rhetoric Osborne employed in the high (or low) point of his speech: the moment burnt into the memory of many of us who remember that day. This is what he said to begin with: "The stakes couldn't be higher or the choice clearer. The certainty and security of

being part of the UK or the uncertainty and risk of going it alone. At the very heart of this choice is the pound in your pocket.”

He escalated the rhetoric as he went on – and if you look online at the government webpage where the speech is reproduced, it’s fascinating to see how line-breaks are managed, as if the speech were a poem, presumably showing him, as he was reading it, where to pause for the greatest emphasis. At the heart of his speech was this: “The value of the pound lies in the entire monetary system underpinning it... So when the nationalists say ‘the pound is as much ours as the rest of the UK’s’ are they really saying that an independent Scotland could insist that taxpayers in a nation it has just voted to leave...

“had to continue to back the currency of this new **foreign** country

“had to consider the circumstances of this **foreign** country when setting their interest rates

“stand behind the banks of this **foreign** country as a lender of last resort

“or stand behind its **foreign** government when it needed public spending support.

“That is patently absurd.

“If Scotland walks away from the UK, it walks away from the UK pound.”

That’s four “foreigns” in as many lines. Osborne was saying that an independent country would be a foreign country, run by a foreign government. His opposition to that prospect – his absolute “unfriendliness” – uttered as it was in the erstwhile capital city of that country – was implicitly transferred to the country and city he was in. In other words, he was standing as a native of Britain, the UK, and creating in the imaginations of everyone watching him the context, for a moment, of being in a foreign and unfriendly nation, beyond whose borders, and only beyond whose borders, good government, money, safety and security lay. This is how he concluded: “There is an alternative, confident, future for Scotland. [...] A future of jobs and prosperity and peace of mind. It’s a strong Scotland within a United Kingdom. That is a future worth fighting for.”

And then he walked swiftly out of the building and took the quickest route back to London before anyone could draw breath to ask a question. This was not up for discussion. He was off. He’d done the job. “Independent” from now on, the word itself, would mean “foreign”. We – people living in Scotland – were now not to see ourselves as citizens, not even neighbours, but as foreigners. This was an exercise in projection, a double or triple bluff,

audacious, surely, and startling in its combination of sophistication and crudity, its appeal and its repulsiveness, its credibility and its absurdity.

I'm reminded of a great poem by Norman MacCaig, one of that brilliant generation of Scottish poets who began writing through the Second World War and wrote their finest works from the 1970s on. Each had their favoured location in Scotland, each one mapping out a territory, charging places with real, renewable value quite different from the economics that were prioritised in the rhetoric of Osborne and others of his stripe. George Mackay Brown in the Orkney archipelago, Sorley Maclean in Raasay and Skye in the Inner Hebrides, Iain Crichton Smith in Lewis and the Outer Hebrides, Edwin Morgan in Glasgow. For Norman MacCaig, Edinburgh was home but Lochinver, in Assynt, up in the far north-west of mainland Scotland, was the favoured place. And it came with its own geology and its own history. MacCaig returned there every summer for many years, so he was not a tourist or even a visitor but, we might say, an intermittent but regular resident. The poem that answers Osborne's monstrous creation of this "foreign" country is "Two Thieves" – an angry poem that stays angry because of its careful organisation of tone in the English language, evoking the Gaelic language in its opening lines: "At the Place for Pulling Up Boats / (one word in Gaelic) the tide is full. / It seeps over the grass like a robber. / Which it is."

The tide has robbed the coast of the "smooth green sward / where the Duke of Sutherland / turned his coach and four" just a few generations ago. MacCaig notes that must have been "an image of richness, a tiny pageantry / in this small dying place" where every house is now "lived in / by the sad widow of a fine strong man." Then the anger starts building: "There were fine strong men in the Duke's time. / He drove them to the shore. He drove them / to Canada." And the explosive alliteration and hammer-blow monosyllables in the final lines say it in thunder: "He gave no friendly thought to them / as he turned his coach and four / by the Place for Pulling Up Boats / where no boats are."

No friendly thoughts were there in our own time either, from George, that day in Edinburgh. Foreigners indeed.

Whether in the verbal, mediated, propaganda warfare of the 2014 referendum, or the long history of imperialism's oppression of linguistic diversity and what are called "minority languages" – in every case, the examples can only be partial, contingent upon circumstance. The arts are never absolute and finished. As Brecht puts it most memorably, "How long do works endure? / As long as they remain unfinished." Equally, what seems like an absolute

judgement from political or economic gurus, is part of a larger gambit, takes place in a continuing debate. Norman MacCaig laments the eviction of crofters and the loss of their Gaelic language, but since he wrote his poems, in various locations crofters have bought out big landowners and repossessed the land, and more people are learning Gaelic now than for generations.

Before we left Jena, we had a free hour or two and wandered into the town square art gallery and happened upon an exhibition entitled “The Woman in the Mirror” showing a range of work by Bonnard, Braque, Cézanne, Chagall, Degas, Léger, Manet, Matisse, Picasso, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec. All this in a small, provincial mid-German town. Maybe the cultural sophistication, civic generosity, multi-ethnic population and university presence in the town had made it a target for the fascist march. I don’t know. I do know that the priorities of art and education in the unfinished expression of national identities, building them in free invention, to take further and renew the sensitisation of the world, are at the opposite end of the spectrum of human behaviour, from fascism.

For pre-eminently through works of art, the virtues of national, local and linguistic distinctions are made public, given to people, universally. Foreignness, in this sense, is not a threat or an imposition, but a matter of curiosity, of optimistic enquiry, of engagement and extension of the human spirit. It is what all the arts so freely offer us, what George Osborne has never understood, and what Norman MacCaig so memorably captured in his poems. And it is at the heart of social and intellectual life, what characterises, for me, more than anything else, the unanswered question of Scotland’s independence.

As we flew home last Saturday night, I heard the KLM pilot say, “Ladies and gentlemen boys and girls, we have just entered the Scottish air space...”

My eyes turned towards the window –