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Scottish Literature: The Big Themes and Other Approaches

Alan Riach (Friday 14 October 2016)

Over the last three weeks, we've been looking at certain related themes and topics that have particular provenance in Scottish literature. On September 23, we considered the ideal of egalitarianism and how the various languages of Scotland invoked that ideal, as writing and voices in Gaelic, Scots and English are all equally vital in our literature: in terms of literary value, no single one has imperial dominance. Then on September 30, we speculated on humour and play, what makes some writers funny. And last week, on October 7, we tried to characterise Scottish literature as something essentially connected to the country's geographical diversity, and that recognising this might be at the heart of the matter of the nation, and endorse an aspiration towards freedom – freedom from oppressions, and freedom to do certain things otherwise than under the constraints of a political zombie uniform mentality.

At the core of all these themes is an endorsement of Scotland's diversity, a way of inverting the familiar cliché of divide-and-rule that has bedevilled Scottish history for long enough. I'm reminded of the last time Alastair Reid delivered his poem, "Scotland" at a public event. The poem famously describes the elation of the poet, walking along the seashore after rain, when larks rise singing in the sky and grace inhabits the air like a halo on heather and hills, and, meeting a miserably scowling woman from the fish shop walking the other way, the "sun-struck madman" cries out delightedly, "What a day it is!" only to be told by the person beneath the bleak, wrinkling brow, "We'll pay for it! We'll pay for it! We'll pay for it!" Having read his poem to its conclusion, Alastair set it on fire, held it up to burn, and declared that we'd paid enough, for far too long. Time to move on.

In these essays I've been thinking of how to address primarily English-language readers generally, but also students, teachers, or residents or visitors curious about our literature, maybe coming to Scotland for the first time, or maybe native born-and-bred Scots still unfamiliar with the literature of the country but wanting to know something of its character, major themes, best writers, historical terrain and contemporary climate. Of course, to say that there are such main themes in a national literature is contentious. There are always people playing a flute or a fiddle or conducting an orchestra of their own. Some of them are

great. But if most of Scotland's writers have been engaged in some way with Scotland's people, communities, languages, geographies, land and seascapes, political and historical conditions, it should be possible to describe some main themes. Other literatures have their own preoccupations so why shouldn't ours?

For instance, three major themes in American literature might be (1) the idea of the Frontier, (2) that of the non-conformist isolatos (Huck Finn lighting out for the territories, Ishmael and Ahab, Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*) or (3) the American dream and its failure: the story of the boy from the log cabin who ends up in the White House, President, a foundational myth of the egalitarian society, and its corrective counterpoint, in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or in the long story of Ernest Hemingway's disillusionment.

A central theme in English literature is that of colonial and imperial history and its microcosm in the good society and its discontents. Consider the trajectory from Shakespeare's history plays and *The Tempest* with its island-native Caliban and imperial magus Prospero, and John Donne describing his lover's body as "My America, my new-found land" to the small-town worlds of Jane Austen and George Eliot, ultimately troubled by the romantic lovers, serious artists and committed political individuals who cut across social proprieties and families with property to protect, whether in the shape of the famously "single" man Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* or Ladislav in *Middlemarch* or the title character in *Daniel Deronda*, who opens little England to a Europe that threatens to overwhelm her. Consider the novels of industrial England: Dickens's London is the heart of an empire from which comes tainted benefit. In the 20th century, consider DH Lawrence's working class miners and their very specifically English society. And internationally, in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, consider the depiction of the imperial exploitation of wealth in an exotic context, and consider, in the transitional work of Joseph Conrad, in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, how we read the imperial, colonial, racist world of the 19th century and read forward into the postcolonial world, in works that offer a depiction of imperialism that implies its own critique.

African literature in English, French and Gikuyu has its own major themes. From Nigeria, Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* describes a human tragedy specific to a colonial clash, and Wole Soyinka's novel *Season of Anomy* sets the myth of Orpheus and Euridice in the Nigerian Civil War. From Senegal, Ousmane Sembene's film *Xala* and his

novel *God's Bits of Wood* describe complex societies in neo-colonial French West Africa, with corrupt politicians and civil servants and a novelist's understanding of people from all social strata. From Kenya, in English and then Gikuyu, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's terrific novels *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* chart the digging deep into, and reconstruction out of, colonialism. South African literature, from Alan Paton's classic *Cry the Beloved Country* to the fiction of Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee, to the poetry of Dennis Brutus, deals directly with the matter of apartheid and the need for freedom from racist social oppression.

David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoë, in *A Reader's Guide to West Indian and Black British Literature* (1987), have a chapter entitled "Selected Themes in West Indian Literature" and list nine of them: (1) Anti-imperialism and Nationalism; (2) The Treatment of Race; (3) The Theme of Childhood; (4) The Treatment of Women / Women Characters; (5) The Theme of Migration; (6) The Rastafarian Theme; (7) Post-independence Critiques; (8) Carnival; (9) Calypso.

What this list makes clear is that some themes might be explored comparatively in any literature – for example, the representation of women or children or indeed men – how masculinity is represented – but there are themes which arise specifically from a particular history and culture (Rastafarianism, Carnival and Calypso) – and there are themes which, while they have a universal reference, are going to be different in different cultures at different moments in history (the treatment of "race", or the themes of migration, anti-imperialism and nationalism). Some are more important, more urgently in need of address in some nations and at certain times than in others. Literature is not exempt from these imperatives.

So what we've suggested over the last few weeks we'll propose as seven major themes in Scottish literature. Some of them Scottish literature shares with other literatures around the world – people are people, language is language, songs are songs and stories are stories, wherever you go. But once again, it's worth emphasising the point that Scotland has its own unfinished history and the distinctiveness of that history has helped to form these distinctive themes: (1) Scotland: The Matter of the Nation; (2) The Idea of Kinship; (3) Resistance and Freedom; (4) Egalitarianism: Common Humanity; (5) Voice and Languages: Gaelic, Scots and English; (6) Geography: Terrain and Locations; (7) Humour, Play and Austerity.

There are other approaches to Scottish literature that would highlight certain questions or areas of concern that our writers have addressed specifically.

Let's note another seven: (1) Time periods and what they might mean. The history of literature like that of any of the arts is conveniently structured according to periods and movements, and some can be more accurately described than others. Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romantic, Modernist, Postmodernist – these are all terms of reference more or less familiar and reliable to cultural historians internationally, though it might be noted that they are not universal. In some eastern cultures the priorities of individualism in the Romantic era are quite unfamiliar. (2) The Literature of War and of Religion. The two are connected. Every literature has addressed the themes of war and bloody conflict. Similarly, every literature has its libraries of the spirit: on the one hand, orthodoxies and doctrines, the rules, and on the other hand, understandings of what we call the “spiritual” for want of a better term, the meanings. When Wilfred Owen looks on the consequences of war and asks, “Was it for this the clay grew tall?” and Benjamin Britten sets his words to music in his War Requiem, there's no doubt about the application and the way it cuts across all national distinctions. (3) Children's Literature. What we encourage children to read is the key to everything else, and that's a reason to think about it seriously, as adults. (4) Sport. Is there a literature of sport? We'll return to this question. (5) Travel Writing. There's a history of writing about travelling through Scotland, and another history of writing about Scottish travellers in the world, the literature of the Scottish diaspora. (6) There's a neglected history of Scottish literature in Latin. And since at least the 1990s, there's a literature that has arisen in the context of (7) New Media.

Now, these aren't “main themes” but they do open up to our enquiry forms of literature that might otherwise be neglected. So let's spend some time with them and see what we can find.

Start with the most basic frame, a spine that makes the subject vertebrate, a history. Time periods or international cultural movements such as Romanticism or Modernism are categories. They can be useful but they can also be misleading. They're almost always defined by a retrospective view: they were hardly ever described in such terms at the time the writers we associate with them were working. Therefore it's worth asking, what do certain literary terms mean, when we apply them to Scottish literature?

Medieval and Renaissance, for example, would be seen as historically consecutive terms in English literature, the first exemplified by Chaucer, the second by Shakespeare: supreme examples that reciprocate the validity of the terms. Chaucer's world-view is profoundly medieval, with all that implies of astronomical, mythological, religious, social and literary structures and assumptions. Shakespeare's is equally of the Elizabethan Renaissance and then of the Jacobean world. And yet if we think of Henryson, Dunbar, Douglas and Lyndsay, then of the Castalian band of poets associated with James VI, we find in Scottish literature that there is no such clear division of literary ethos. In many respects, from 1503-1513, the court of James IV could be described as a Renaissance court, rather than a medieval one. The essential text here is Andrea Thomas's *Glory and Honour: The Renaissance in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2013).

The era of Enlightenment and Romanticism, from around 1750 to around 1840, is distinctively complex in Scottish literature. In English literature, this period is conventionally seen as a progression from the classical precision, snap and crackle of Pope to the individualistic radicalism and grand gestures of Shelley and his contemporaries. In Scottish literature, however, a more complex blend of these two cultural contexts is evident in, for example, Burns (certainly Romantic, but also a child of the Enlightenment) and Scott (certainly an Enlightenment writer, but also the novelist whose heroes and heroines include the Highland outlaw Rob Roy and the peasant cow-feeder's daughter Jeanie Deans).

A similar complexity can be understood in Scottish literature's relation to Modernism, and we'll return to this, and the literature of war, next week.

These are merely examples of ways in which traditional, familiar categories might be usefully complicated by reading Scottish literature against the grain of the "Great Tradition" of English literature. They show how far such a "Great Tradition" is constructed by choices of preference and self-consciously retrospective definition. Literary history itself is only one way of encountering great writers. Another is simply to roam around, without reference to historical periods, national traditions or transitional movements. But if this can be serendipitous and lead you to discoveries you could not have predicted, it can be hit-or-miss and arbitrary. More and deeper knowledge of the contexts of works of literature and the biographies of writers is usually a good thing.

The great American poet William Carlos Williams once said, "You should never explain a poem – but it always helps." In Scottish literature, almost every demonstration that

a writer is worth reading is an act of reclamation from neglect, and a challenge to an order of authority which already exists. Reading itself is one of the arts of resistance.