

The centripetal centrifuge: decentralisation, crossing genre boundaries and theatre in Scottish culture ¹

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The importance of borders and boundaries not just between Scotland and other countries and cultures, but within Scotland, and the necessity for any political economic or cultural settlement of crossing them leads, in effect, to the need to transgress boundaries and cross borders, both internal and external. The point is that innate, or at least historically grounded, cultural complexity and hybridity in Scotland is inescapable. In place of escape or deciding which side they belong to, Scots and Scottish writers have, consciously or not, embraced the fractures and borders as lying in the middle, not on the edge, of their self-perceptions and work. Scottish consciousness of the 'Border' with England and regional boundaries within Scotland remains high, for whatever reasons, and a matter of regular debate and cultural action, whether in the study of history, the invention of English Literature or the exploration, invention and re-invention of Scottish literature. There are, of course, many readings of the Ossian phenomenon, but one must be that, in his work, Macpherson creates a new crossing of the boundaries between Gaelic and Scots-English cultures. He sought, in so doing, to create a model of epic recognisable across Europe, however much it might transgress the appropriate boundaries of actual Gaelic practice. In short, he creates new dimensions to match classic European models and so appears to subvert original generic forms. In modern times, similar issues of borders and linguistic boundaries have arisen in discussion of the very nature of 'Scottish Literature'. There has been a tendency among many critics to use this term in a way that excluded writing in Gaelic or focused only on literature in Scots. Yet, it must be clear that Scottish literature is multilingual, not only existing in Gaelic, Scots and English, and arguably in earlier days in Norse and Welsh, but also having a very important and often neglected Scoto-Latin tradition. In this, George Buchanan sits as a major, but often forgotten, influence on the development of modern theatre throughout Europe, and by extension on world theatre. There were many editions of his seminal tragedies *Jephthes* and *Baptistes* throughout Europe from the mid-sixteenth until late-of

eighteenth centuries. Their influence on the development of neo-classical drama in particular and, so, of much modern drama was central.

Crossing of literary and linguistic borders and boundaries in more recent literature does not apply only to Scots/English and Gaelic liminalities. Hybridity is used extensively as a model for Scottish literature, for example, by Cairns Craig in *The Modern Scottish Novel* and by Liam McIlvanney and Murray Pittock variously in articles on eighteenth century literature. In her chapter on Burns, 'Writing Scotland: Robert Burns', in the forthcoming *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, Carol McGuirk observes:

The fact is that, though the ratio shifts from text to text, Burns always blends English with Scots, sentiment with satire, literary with local references. His 'magnificent mixedness', as Robert Crawford calls it in *Devolving English Literature* (1992), suggests not capitulation to English cultural pressure, but what Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), has termed 'hybridity', a form of resistance to cultural authority that works by infusing the colonisers' language and speech with local or 'native' references. [...] Bhabha's idea of hybridity offers a way past the simplistic dyad – 'good' dialect versus 'bad' English – which has characterised so much Burns criticism in modern times².

McGuirk continues by reminding us of the larger cultural implications of Burns's linguistic and generic hybridity:

With his mixed range of allusions and languages, Burns in fact seeks to elude capture by any cultural authority, whether Scottish or English. In the Kirk satires and 'Holy Willie's Prayer', tyrannies of the local, provincial smallnesses, are satirised just as energetically as the notion that English is the only language proper for British poetry. Even Burns's famous title *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* is more elliptical than may at first appear, standing at once as a provocative statement of local allegiance and (in its hedge of 'chiefly') a hint of other interests, too. In Burns's addresses to and for Scotland, in Bhabha's words, 'no political ideologies [...] claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves'. Burns himself, in short, saw no poetic use for cultural purity. It is no accident that the final lines of 'Address to the Unco Guid' define 'what's resisted' (emphasis in original) as the measure of personal integrity. (McGuirk, 2006)

Within twenty years of Burns's death, the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, opened in 1769, launched its dramatisations of Scott's novels under the management of

W. H. Murray from 1817 on. These energised and provide focus for the developing phenomenon known as the National Drama. This embodied many examples of boundary-crossing and hybridities not just in its exploration of English/British and Scottish relations and identities, but also in its practical, institutional functioning, making use of song and comedy and influencing popular theatre and music hall ³.

Seeing no need for 'cultural purity', in McGuirk's words, is, indeed, a longstanding Scottish literary phenomenon. This is so whether one considers the mid sixteenth-century dramaturgical variousness of David Lindsay's *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaitis* or the modern experimental transgression of forms that characterise and identify Edwin Morgan's poetry and Ian Hamilton Finlay's new syntheses of poetry, sculpture, visual arts and gardening. Many artists, particularly in modern times when Scottishness is being redefined, continue to find 'personal integrity' and national, cultural and artistic identity in the need to cross boundaries of language and genre in 'what's resisted' and so what new synthesis transgression creates. Such transgression, indeed, is part of the very nature of Scottish theatre from the earliest times, combining popular and 'high', music and song, comedy and tragedy, in a set of hybrid native dramatic forms. Such genre crossing was, of course, common in Medieval and Renaissance theatre, but the Scottish theatre appears to have been able to sustain such flexibility when other European traditions have tended to generic specialisation. (It is a fascinating hypothesis that such generic specialisation may have resulted from the colonisation of theatre by royal courts from the seventeenth century on. If so, the removal of the Scottish court to London in 1603, often seen as to the disadvantage of theatre in Scotland, may have had a long-term unexpected, and arguably positive, effect in staving off such specialisation into more rigidly separated genres.) Processes of decentring and hybridity may, then, be seen as key elements in Scottish culture generally and its literature and theatre especially, with renewed importance in contemporary drama. The present author has argued in David Bradby's and Susanna Capon's *Freedom's Pioneer*, a collection of essays on the work of John McGrath, that a wide variety of traditions and genres worked together and hybridised from the medieval period on to form a Scottish theatre tradition. This, it is argued, was particularly congenial to McGrath's theatrical genre crossing:

It is clear that the [Scottish] theatrical tradition that offered these 'advantages' to McGrath's work was deep-rooted. McGrath could respond to a longstanding history of Scottish theatre and his work in Scotland further developed and transmitted the potential of that history ⁴.

It is important, of course, not to exaggerate the contribution of Scottish theatre to McGrath's own artistic development. Ros Merkin reminds us in her chapter in *Freedom's Pioneer*, of the contribution to his work of the popular variety of forms found in the drama of the Liverpool Everyman Theatre during McGrath's period of connection with that vibrant theatre in 1971 and 1972 ⁵. Nonetheless, it must be clear that theatrical hybridity, as well as literary, is central to Scottish culture.

Such hybridity and related generic boundary crossing have deep roots, specifically in Scottish theatre. Maria DiCenzo notes in her 1996 study of 7:84 (Scotland) Theatre Company, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain*:

In theatrical terms, what Scotland could claim to be its own was a tradition of popular forms such as music hall and panto — live forms of entertainment in which music and comedy figure prominently. What 7:84 did was to take advantage of the familiarity with and entertainment values of these forms (and others such as the 'ceilidh') and to use them as vehicles for political analysis and commentary ⁶.

Femi Folorunso goes further and places the version of music hall known as 'Scottish Variety' in a popular tradition going back four centuries:

from its introduction until the late 1940s, it was the most popular and richest form of entertainment in Scotland [...] and [...] the music hall occupied the middle space in a direct line from the seventeenth-century popular entertainment to contemporary drama in Scotland ⁷.

Indeed, Folorunso dates the interaction of popular and text-based theatre to a very early period:

We now know, for instance, that a pattern of utilitarian drama was established in Scotland before the Reformation. This pattern achieved its highest standards in Sir David Lindsay's *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaitis*. A close scrutiny of the language and techniques of this play suggests very much the kind of imposition [...] of lite-

rary order on popular elements in order to make some urgent, serious political statements. (Folorunso, p.182)

Complementing Folorunso's work, Adrienne Scullion suggests the modern vehicles of music hall and panto that form key strands in modern Scottish theatre also have other deep roots. She suggests that, whatever the different and somewhat later, though related, experience of the development of music hall in England, in Scotland in the early to mid nineteenth century,

a particular and significant influence in the evolution towards music halls per se came from this ceilidh tradition, which [immigrant Highland and Irish] communities brought with them to industrialising Glasgow ⁸.

Scullion's insight offers an elegant circularity for the way that McGrath returns via popular theatre forms to ceilidh performance techniques particularly in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil* (1973). Further, in terms of the long-term influence of such developments, it is also the case that, with the subsequent export of Scottish music and cultural idioms through the Scottish diaspora, such popular music hall forms acquired a whole new range of cultural connotations and meanings. Indeed, the transmission of Scottish identity to expatriate communities abroad formed part of this same process ⁹.

Such a central role for hybridity in Scottish theatre, and by extension literature, has been observed by a number of critics furth of Scotland. Jean-Pierre Simard, for example, has observed:

Based on popular and political traditions, the rich diversity of contemporary dramatic writing in Scotland shapes today the specific poetic of rooted orality and vernacular. This supports a re-reading of the popular traditions of Scottish society in all its diversity. When recognisable parts of the popular music heritage are not directly included, music and songs within the playtext with recognisable tonalities, accents and discourse pay frequent intertextual homage to this pre-existing corpus.

(Fondée sur les traditions populaires et politiques, la riche diversité des écritures dramatiques contemporaine en Écosse dessine aujourd'hui la poétique spécifique d'une oralité enracinée et vernaculaire. Elle épaula une relecture des traditions populaire de la société écossaise dans sa diversité. Quand des pièces reconnaissables du patrimoine musical populaire ne sont pas directement insérées, musique et chanson diégétiques, aux tonalités, aux accents et au discours reconnaissables adressent un fréquent hommage intertextuel à ce corpus préexistant.) ¹⁰.

More recent playwrights develop this Scottish theatrical exploration of hybridity and intertextuality. With some, this may be the exploration of hybridity in dramaturgy and performativity as in Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004). Here the surreal potential of theatre is used in Act One to explore and express the inner workings of the mind of the play's heroine, who suffers from — or perhaps enjoys — her serious mental illness. Act One is full of theatrical jokes and tricks and zany *Alice in Wonderland* characters. Its colour and humour are sharply contrasted with the antiseptic colourless 'reality' of Act Two's setting of a hospital ward that seeks to confine her. In Act Two, the lively offbeat articulate heroine of Act One is taciturn and drugged, finding becoming 'well' on the terms of her carers and family hardly attractive. With others, like Henry Adams in *The People Next Door* (2003), the concern with hybridity may be thematic. Adams, incidentally, is from Wick in Caithness, a former county where there is to this day a particularly marked local consciousness of Norse as opposed to Gaelic heritage. A very clear place-name boundary runs north to south halfway across Caithness to the east of which Norse-derived names are found, while to its west many more Gaelic names predominate. Adams's Caithness is a specific nexus of a particular version of Scottish hybridity. This is immanent in his plays. As Danièle Berton observes of *The People Next Door*:

In this opening scene, Nigel seems to re-learn who he is. He finds, in doing this, some difficulty. He speaks of his self in the third person. He is Nigel; he is Salif; Salif is another; Salif is him. I am me, him and another... Destabilised and at a loss, Nigel drifts mentally between two egos, two cultures, two religions, two countries, two continents[...]

In the company of Marco, presented as 'of mixed race, predominantly Afro-Caribbean' and of Mrs Mac – short for MacCallum – who is marked out thanks to 'a distinctive Scottish burr', he attaches himself as an emblem of engagement and hybridity in a nation where the principles of integration and assimilation are not demanded by law.

(Dans cette scène d'ouverture, Nigel semble réapprendre qui il est. Il éprouve, pour ce faire, quelque difficulté. Il parle de lui à la troisième personne. Il est Nigel; il est Salif; Salif est un autre; Salif est lui. Je est moi, lui et un autre... Désarmé et dérouté, Nigel dérive mentalement entre deux ego, deux cultures, deux religions, deux pays, deux continents.[...]

En compagnie de Marco, présenté comme 'of mixed race, predominantly Afro-

Caribbean' et de Mrs Mac – diminutif de MacCallum – qui se singularise grâce à 'a distinctive Scottish burr', il s'affiche comme emblème de brassage et de métissage dans une nation où les principes de l'intégration et de l'assimilation ne sont pas exigés par la loi.)¹¹.

Indeed, in the present author's plays, hybridity and intertextuality have frequently been used as means both of dramatic structure and of signification¹². *Carnegie* (1973) explores the ambiguities of that philanthropic Scottish-American Robber Baron in a structure that moves through naturalistic dramatic scenes, original songs, excerpts from Carnegie's own speeches and interludes, at first comic, but increasingly serious, exposing corrupt business practices. In *Mary* (1977), a serio-comic examination of the various versions and myths of Mary Queen of Scots is conducted through three levels of dramatic realisation. In her personal scenes, Mary and her companions act in a naturalistic manner. In the scenes of negotiation among the Scottish nobles, they are presented, often comically, but with a dark undertow of realpolitik, as a cross between senior businessmen and Mafia leaders, discussing business, political gain and potential assassinations while playing golf, during hawking or over a meal. Thirdly, the main plot-lines of Mary's life are driven by a series of scenes written in a variety of theatre conventions and intertextualities: Mary is introduced to Darnley in a pantomime moment based on Cinderella, with Knox playing Fairy Godmother, a scene which transposes in a theatrical flash to their courtship expressed in Cowardesque mode; her banishment to Loch Leven is presented in Shakespearean blank verse; her flight from Loch Leven is a send-up of a pot-boiler Scots one-act comedy. *A Great Reckonin* (2000) takes this convention further. The action is built round the search of a troupe of actors - presented in realistic, if satiric, mode in their professional rivalry and backbiting - trying to create a play about the death of James I at whose court they have arrived just after his assassination. The play employs the potential of theatrical imagination to recreate and explore events in James's life up to and including his death. *The Scotch Play* (1991) explores other versions of intertextuality, presenting in five scenes matching the original event structure of Macbeth the story of the rise and fall of a football trainer who deposes his manager, Duncan, and in his turn falls, all in blank verse in Scots.

The recognition of the nature of hybridity in Scotland's culture has been complemented by developments in recent scholarship to lead to the redefinition

of that culture and its literature. There is a new recognition that the term 'Scottish' is multicultural and multivalent – indeed, intercultural – and that Scotland has always been multi-ethnic and multilingual. Further, as the editors of the forthcoming *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* comment in their general introduction: 'Oral and performance modalities have been a notable feature in the development of Scottish Literature'¹³. They argue that there is a crucial distinction between Scottish literature and

the English literary models that have defined the canon and which find linguistic hybridity atypical to their paradigm. But 'atypicality' implies a prior norm, and it is precisely this kind of reactive or oppositional view that requires to be carefully handled if Scottish literature's separate, but also integral, status is to emerge. (*Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, 2006)

Indeed, it might be said that the canon of English Literature has been developed, as Cairns Craig has so clearly shown in *Out of History* (1996), by centralising, suppressing difference, canonising and appropriating writers who belong to more than one tradition, whether American, Caribbean, Irish or Scottish.

In Scottish literature, by contrast, cultural and linguistic diversity and regional difference continue to embody underlying forces which might in other circumstances drive apart the unity and integrity of Scottish culture, let alone Scottish literature and Scottish theatre. Yet, there have been, and are, complex inter-relationships of great diversity involving hybridity and intercultural interactions for more than a millennium. These in the past have brought Norse, as well as Irish, Gaelic, English, Scoto-Latin, Scots and even Welsh strands together and now, in such work as Suhayl Saadi's *Psychoraag* (2004)¹⁴ with, in the words of its publicity blurb, its 'urban Scots peppered with Urdu', new syntheses are emerging. There has been discussion on occasion about the phenomenon of diglossia in Scottish literature and life involving Scots and English as between domestic and public discourse. This is at once simplistic and, in its frequent reductive restriction to Scots/English and social axes, a simplification of a far more complex situation. Bilinguality, and even multilinguality, allows not just a variety of forms of diglossia, but a veritable heteroglossia, all kinds of opportunities of expression in a Scottish context. Meanwhile, register shift, whatever the primary language employed, is a widely employed phenomenon in Scottish usage both socially and artistically¹⁵. Many critics, Randall Stevenson, Lindsay

Paterson, John Corbett and Katja Lenz, for example¹⁶, have discussed the varieties of language, not just Scots or English or, now, Gaelic, but varieties within Scots or English as a key dimension of Scottish theatre.

There are ever-present elements of internal difference – even, in McGuirk's take on Burns's terms, of 'what's *resisted*' as a touchstone of personal integrity – in Scottish literature. Somehow, out of these elements of internal difference that might appear likely to fracture Scottish culture by their centrifugally inclined diversity and otherness, hybridity and intercultural interchange seem to act as a force of centripetal cultural gravity. This tends to suggest that Scottish theatre and, indeed, Scottish culture are best seen as hybrid, yet diversifying, a constantly changing, constantly asserted expression of common identity without an imposed centre. It comprises a creative core of constantly separating and integrating otherness offering a gravitational hold on — and expressing the varieties of — Scottishness, Scottish literature and Scottish theatre.

Notes :

- 1- This paper is in memory and celebration of the work of the late Bill Findlay, researcher and scholar, inspiring colleague and dear friend.
- 2- Carol McGuirk, 'Writing Scotland: Robert Burns', in Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning, Murray Pittock (eds), *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, Edinburgh University Press forthcoming, 2006
- 3- On the National Drama, see particularly the section under that subtitle (pp. 143-149), in Barbara Bell, 'The Nineteenth Century' in Bill Findlay (ed.) *A History of Scottish Theatre* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998) pp.137-206
- 4- Ian Brown. 'Celtic Centres, the Fringes and John McGrath' in David Bradby and Susanna Capon (eds), *Freedom's Pioneer* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005) p. 93
- 5- Ros Merkin, 'A Life Outside 7:84: John McGrath and the Everyman Theatre, Liverpool' in David Bradby and Susanna Capon (eds), *Freedom's Pioneer* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005) pp. 25-38
- 6- Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 87
- 7- Folorunso Femi, 'Scottish Drama and the Popular Tradition', in Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace (eds), *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) p. 177

- 8- Alasdair Cameron and Adrienne Scullion, 'W. F. Frame and the Scottish Popular Theatre Tradition' in Alasdair Cameron and Adrienne Scullion (ed), *Scottish Popular Theatre and Entertainment* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Library, 1996) p. 40, fn. 3
- 9- I am indebted to Paul Maloney for this insight.
- 10- Jean-Pierre Simard, 'Populaire, politique at poétique: Réévaluer la réputation du théâtre écossais', *Études Écossaises*, no. 10 (2005), p. 193
- 11- Danièle Berton, 'Norme et marginalité: De la bonne ou de la mauvaise réputation dans The People Next Door de Henry Adam', *Études Écossaises*, no. 10 (2005), p. 160.
- 12- For further discussion on this topic see, for example, Steve Cramer, 'History, Ideology and Performance in Ian Brown's *Mary* and *A Great Reckoning*', *International Journal of Scottish Theatre*, Vol. 3 no. 1 (June 2002) <http://arts.qmuc.ac.uk/ijost/> and Susanne Kries, 'Ian Brown' in John Bull (ed.), *British and Irish Dramatists since World War II*, Fourth Series - *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume Three Hundred Ten (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005) pp. 42-50
- 13- Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning, Murray Pittock, 'Scottish Literature: Criticism and the Canon', in Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning, Murray Pittock (eds), *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, Edinburgh University Press forthcoming, 2006
- 14- Suhayl Saadi, *Psychoraag* (Edinburgh: Black and White Publishing, 2004)
- 15- See, for ex., Ian Brown and Katja Lenz, "Oh Dearie Me!": dramatic rhetoric and linguistic subversion in the Scottish situation comedy, *The High Life*, in Edgar W. Schneider (ed), *Englishes Around the World* Vol 1 (John Benjamins Publishing Company: Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1997) pp 109-23
- 16- See for example: Randall Stevenson, 'Snakes and Ladders, Snakes and Owls: Charting Scottish Theatre' in Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace, *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) pp 1- 20; Lindsay Paterson, 'Language and Identity on the Stage' in Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace, *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996) pp.75-83; John Corbett, *Language and Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); Katja Lenz, *Die schottische Sprache im modernen Drama* (Universitätsverlag C. Winter: Heidelberg, 1999).