

**ON THE NATURE OF SCOTTISH "GHOSTS":  
SCOTTISH HISTORY  
AND SCOTTISH LITERATURE.**

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When one begins to wonder about what mythologies are made of, the first things that come to mind are either the gods and heroes of the classical world, or the supernatural beings of the particular folklore one feels closest to. We usually forget that mythologies are being created all the time (see Roland Barthes's study of modern *Mythologies*), just like history is happening every minute, although we can only grasp this history properly once it is past. As Ernest Cassirer and Lévi-Strauss argued, both history and mythology work as systems, and both are closely related to language, which is, of course, also the substance of literature. The arguments provided below should serve to put Scotland forward as an example of how mythologies are absorbed by literature, and of how these can be seen to derive from historical myths, that is, from imaginative, and often mystical, interpretations of history.

All over Scotland a great wealth of folk tradition has been preserved in legend and song. Each people that occupied the land

contributed with their own hoards of culture. The ancient Pictish and Celtic mythologies were at the base, particularly at the Highlands. Then the Vikings brought their Norse mysteries to the Northern islands, while the inhabitants of the Lowlands celebrated in the so-called "border ballads" their heroic defence against Southern peoples, such as the Romans, then the Anglosaxons, then the English.

It has been said that there was a time in Scotland when Green Ladies -or "Bansheers", that is, mortals transformed into fairies, who served as tutelary beings- were a matter of every day life. People grew so accustomed to them that, when they saw one, they just remarked: "There she goes again!" (McNeill 1977: 116). Undoubtedly, this must have been a golden age for poets. One of them, known as Thomas the Rhymer in the 13th century, was believed to owe his prophetic gifts as poet and seer to his intercourse with the Queen of Elfland (McNeill 1977: 111).

To the modern historical mind this period seems at once obscure and bright, a "timeless" Golden Age. But there was an end to it. The Reformation of the 16th century came to Scotland by the heavy hand and intemperate rhetoric of a harsh Calvinist called John Knox. His work and his clashes with the Catholic monarch Mary Queen of Scots, whom he gave over to the hated English for execution, were to remain an indelible memory in the national mythology of the country. Knox brought to Scotland what MacDiarmid called the "hard fact", "the inoppugnable [sic] reality" (Watson 1984: 98), against the fancies of poets. It has been recognized that he alone shouldn't be blamed for institutionalizing all the puritanical and constricting aspects already existing in the national psyche. Yet many Scottish poets have found it difficult to forgive him for the revolution he commanded. Edwin Muir said that his main guilt was to have robbed Scotland of all the benefits of the Renaissance (Muir 1930: 309), an epoch which gave the

neighbour country, England, the genius of Shakespeare, among so many other things. But perhaps the most generalized claim is that of the modern poet, George Mackay Brown, who blames Knox for having killed the songs and the ballads, in other words, the symbols that his people lived by. It should be recognized, however, that Knox himself provided, through his multi-layered historical personality, a symbol for literature, although a negative one. Few important modern Scottish writers have failed to express, at one time or another, their more or less agitated opinion on this controversial figure. Furthermore, it is not completely true that Calvinism murdered the fairies of Scotland. Suffice it to say that a remarkable book dealing with this ancient faith was produced and published by one Reverend Robert Kirk in 1691 under the suggestive title of *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns, and Fairies*, where he gives a detailed account of the nature and customs of these elusive people, treating them as generally recognized physical phenomena (McNeill 1977: 105).

In fact, the really deadly blows against the fairies were to strike the fated nation in the 18th century. Two apparently unrelated events contributed to this, showing up the internal divisions that had characterized Scotland since the Lowlands had developed as a kingdom with much of the inevitable Anglosaxon and Norman influence from England, while the Highlands had remained, in actuality, the stronghold of the primitive Celtic clans. In many respects Highlands and Lowlands had been one single nation only for opposition to the ever richer and oppressive England. The two decisive events are the Union of Scotland and England in 1707, and the Jacobite risings of the '45. The Union was an economic manoeuvre of the Lowland businessmen, who wanted to have a share in the English prosperity. But most of the Scots, and particularly the Highlanders, wouldn't forget old grievances and ambitions so easily, and this was one of the main reasons for the

Jacobite revolt that ended up at Culloden Moor (near Inverness), where the chieftains of most of the Celtic clans gave their life for their ready-made hero and leader, Bonnie Prince Charlie. His attempt to conquer England with a primitive army was probably the last and most anachronistic act of "chivalry" (for such has been the word used to conceal his concrete aims) in British history. The very absurdity of his endeavour undoubtedly contributed to make him a suitable hero of Romance.

Nor did the Scottish national identity die at Culloden, unless by this identity we meant the clan system, a bellicose organization at a reduced scale that had no place in modern Europe. The worst came with the aftermath of the defeat, when the winners set out to repress Celtic language and custom, so as to thwart the possibility of any further nationalistic rise. Local traditions were eradicated in many areas of Scotland, for not only Gaelic was prohibited in the Highlands, also Lowland Scots was despised as an uncouth dialect, and David Hume published a list of "Scotticisms" that all learned Scots should get rid of. What they couldn't get rid of was the historical imagination of the people. Bonnie Prince Charlie, the myth who has little to do with the historical Prince Charles Edward Stuart and his down-to-earth dynastic ambitions, inspired as many beautiful songs as any Queen of the Fairies had done before. The real change is that now we can trace the historical origin of the myth monarch. On the other hand, the Enlightenment bore more intellectual fruits for Scotland than possibly for any other European nation. It is at this stage that what professor David Daiches (1964) has called the Scottish cultural paradox is most noticeable. The Scottish writers reacted to the Union in two opposite ways: they either returned demonstratively to Scottish traditions, using Scots language, as Robert Burns did, or they set about proving that Scotsmen, independence or not independence, could still be in the vanguard of European thought, using English, as a widely

acceptable language, more effectively than the English themselves. This was the case with David Hume and Adam Smith. The paradox was, therefore, between an emotional and a rational response to the loss of Scottish political identity. It was the emotional reaction that produced a characteristically Scottish Literature. From that moment on it was to find its material in the past, where all the Scottish dreams and nightmares seem to remain. Even Carlyle's historical writing in the 19th century appears haunted by the irrecoverability of the past. His studies on the character of heroes are, to the modern reader, attempts to transform history into mythology. For the past to become alive and present, it had to be reinvented again and again. This is how mythologies are born.

From the 18th century the major achievements in Scottish literature were to become reflections on what is Scotland, and elegies on the loss of cultural identity, in works full of characters who have reminiscences of the heroes and villains of Scottish history. The heroes are often representatives of the old Scottish communities, or even the whole community as a collective character. This helps to explain why Jung's theories of the collective unconscious had a great influence on some of the writers in the first Scottish Literary Renaissance of our own century. The villains in much Scottish fiction are those who bring change, the servants of the great god Progress who will kill the small rural communities, drawing mainly on the historical fact of the Highland Clearances during the Industrial Revolution. When these stories do not end in destruction and defeat, as they usually do, they end in a dream of renewal, in a resurrection of the communities of the past, as they are imagined by the authors. However, historical change alone shouldn't be thought to have given any new life to the Scots. Maybe historical circumstances only spurred on feelings that had long been at the heart of the Scottish people: one is that primitive sense of community (the Presbyterian organization is an

outstanding example of this); secondly, the common place of the melancholic character of the Gael (although this might have been overemphasized by the writers of the Celtic Twilight), and thirdly, a belief in fate, which is older than Calvinism, and maybe derives from the Vikings, as George Mackay Brown has suggested (1969: 48).

Since mythologies in Scottish literature after the 18th come mainly from history, these mythologies are easily palpable: there is a deep sense of reality in Scottish fiction and poetry. When fantasy is introduced, it is always as a true part of reality, or in order to explain this reality. There is little escapism as an aim in most of the best Scottish literature. Even the most apparently superficial poetry and song of the major poets, like that of Robert Burns, comes as a seriously passionate response to historical problems. As Maurice Lindsay, a modern Scottish poet and critic, says of Burns:

He is part of the human personality suppressed by Calvinism, Burns is the poet and fornicator, the creator of music, the inspirer of dancing (the kirk for centuries discouraged dancing), summing up in himself all the elements in the Scotsman that the kirk, unable to destroy them, for they are essential parts in our nature, has suppressed. (Lindsay 1977: 233)

In other words, we could say that Burns is the Edward Hyde of the 18th century, the outcast of a repressive Calvinist society.

As for Sir Walter Scott, just like Burns before him, he had to deal with the dichotomy which has faced all the Scottish writers since 1707. On the one hand, his common-sense nature made him support the industrial changes that came with the Union; on the other hand, he devoted his talents to the appreciation of the heroic or anti-heroic drama of Scotland's history. Thus he definitely established in literature the mythology and the attitudes of the Scots novelists that came after him: their overall theme would still be the

persistence of the past. It is hardly surprising, then, that the historical novel was born in Scotland.

The seriousness of Scottish fiction and its lack of escapist fantasy is most noticeable in the character of the Gothic novel in Scotland. A meeting with the English Gothic horror-novelist M.G. Lewis (1775-1818) seems first to have aroused Sir Walter Scott's interest in collecting ballads, an interest which resulted in the publication of his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Ballads* (Kelso, 1802). However, in the introduction to this, his first book, Scott declares what will remain his intentions throughout his writings, that is, to "contribute somewhat to the history of my native country; the peculiar features of whose manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally" (Lindsay 1977: 277). He argues serious historicism, yet Gothic inclinations are evident in his novels, which verge on the borderland between history and romance, because in fact the historical Scotland is alive with dark Macbeth-like Gothic landscapes, with Gothic stories of witches and demons, with Gothic historical characters, such as the fanatical Covenanters of the 17th century or the spirited Jacobites of the 18th century, and because the antiquarian taste of the Gothic had become a natural tendency in the Scottish character.

Now we could take this argument even further and say that there is hardly any fantasy in the Scottish Gothic novel, for the Gothic element is a part of the history of the nation. Sir Walter Scott used history at the service of romance, with the result that history is romanticized, and fantasy, the Gothic, assimilates a real significance (this explains why, for instance, the English "Wars of the Roses", a term invented by Scott in his novel *Ann of Geierstein*, chapter VII, taken from an episode in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, is still widely used by history books). Such is the case that Francis R. Hart makes out, after discussing the necessity to "understand Gothic less reductively" (1978: 19), if we don't want to exclude

novelists like Scott and Smollett from this tendency. The other Scottish representative of the Gothic to be recalled here is James Hogg, who published his *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* in 1824. Together with the thrill of the demonic presence, there prevails a psychological tension that is only human: the primitive fear of being bewitched, of the guilt of having the devil inside, a complex that derives from Scottish Calvinism. Likewise, in James Hogg's other most important novel, *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1817), there is no such brownie, only a desperate Covenanter in disguise. The paradox in the Scottish Enlightenment seems to have produced a rationalization of the traditionally recurrent preternatural.

Contemporary with this tendency, and equally defining of the Scottish attitude, is the grief for the passing of irrecoverable ways of living. John Galt is as much interested as Scott in the end of the past; his best known novel, *Annals of the Parish* (1821), laments the gradual extinction of rural communities, the already mentioned subject that will be central to two of the most important Scottish writers of the 20th century, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and George Mackay Brown. Needless to say that there is the myth of a Golden Age, that is, of a perfect way of life that was lost, implicit in this.

With the exception of the Victorian novelist George MacDonald, whose novels convey a kind of "transcendental nationalism" (Hart 1978: 105), and the numerous works of the "Kailyard" school, much disparaged for their sentimentality and provincialism, the second half of the 19th century marks a comparative lull in the production of Scottish literature, until Stevenson reaffirms the romance tendency in Scottish fiction. But some significant phenomena are prominent:

First, Gaelic literature, with its old propensity for elegy and lament, found a bitter enough subject in the Highland clearances,

when the territory of the Scottish Gaels was being literally emptied of them, to place sheep there instead. Protest for these abuses, and the leavetaking, a part of actual social history, became the motif for their literature, in place of the old legends and mythologies. But the renewed mythologies of the "Celtic Twilight" were soon to follow.

Secondly, history itself was being cleared from Scottish public life, and substituted by myths to preserve national pride or old institutions, such as the Kirk of Scotland, which went as far as to insist on the Presbyterianism of the Celtic church. Religion entered the universities, and the history chairs for teachers were either left empty, or unsalaried. Many practical Scots felt that the death of Scottish history meant freedom and progress.

Thirdly, then: while nationalism had become a revolutionary force in Europe, Lowland Scottish culture remains complacent. Patriotic appeal for Burns and Walter Scott became conservative and romantic, a free-time activity. The consequence was a provincialist and sentimental literature collectively known as the Kailyard (J.M. Barrie, Ian Maclaren, S.R. Crockett). The best Scottish works (of Scott, Hogg, Galt, Stevenson) were motivated by the passions of the past and the cruelty of change; their greatness lies in the universal applicability of these dramas. But the Kailyard is simply against change, and when it looks to the past - usually no further than one generation back - it describes timeless isolated rural communities, whose only dramas are domestic events, which always reach a happy ending, when things are restored to their usual order and the "good" triumphs. Still the Kailyardists are projecting a mythology, but a very limited one.

By the 1890's the literary revival known as Celtic Twilight arrived in Scotland, although it would never have the impact it had in Ireland. The most relevant writer is William Sharp (writing under the pseudonym of 'Fiona Macleod'), who introduced motifs that would remain central in 20th Scottish fiction. One of them is

the figure of an old lady who stands for the land, its tradition is magic, and the eternal feminine principle; another is the suggestion of a lost Golden Age of the remote past. Both subjects belong with a tradition that has been continued, in different degrees and form very varied approaches, by Edwin Muir (only the second subject), Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Neil M. Gunn and George Mackay Brown.

When the Scottish novel, due to predominance of the Kailyard, was close to becoming too sentimental and complacent, it was given a radical turn by the publication of George Douglas Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters* in 1901, a novel that includes a crude, naturalistic family tragedy, whose main responsible is a tyrannical father with features that are reminiscent of the Calvinist patriarch, John Knox. It is the story of a divided community and, as such, a reflection of the story of Scotland itself (for the feeling that the Lowlanders had betrayed the Highlanders in the events of the 18th century was strong). The Scottish gossips are modelled on the chorus of classical Greek tragedy. If we combine the crudity of this novel with some supernatural elements of spiritual depth, we have the typical Scottish novel of the 20th century.

The Scots have become fiercely critical of their bad habits, such as heavy drinking. However, the drink, which brings the *House with the Green Shutters* to destruction, has very different consequences in Hugh MacDiarmid's long modernist poem, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), where it is the excuse for an alcoholic, imaginative odyssey, as strange as any undertaken by Burn's "Tam O' Shanter", or by Thomas the Rhymer in the land of the Elves. At one dramatic stage of the voyage, the Drunk Man finds himself crucified on the Thistle, the emblematic symbol of Scotland, which is at once beautiful and covered with thorns, proud and painful. So is Scottish history to modern Scottish writers.

Hugh MacDiarmid became for Scotland in the 1920's what Yeats had been for Ireland at the turn of the century. He dominated

the literary scene from the journals, and through his poems and essays, propelling nationalist politics with national culture and renewed mythologies. But the Scottish mythologies, as I am trying to make clear, were of a different order, more influenced by history than by folklore. In addition, the following decade, during which the first Scottish Literary Renaissance fully developed through a variety of young writers, had its own peculiarities in the whole of the Western world, that in turn were to influence this Renaissance. "Even before they were quite over, the thirties took on the appearance of myth", says Robin Skelton on opening the introduction to his anthology of the poetry of this decade (Skelton 1985: 13). And the mythologies of the thirties, skillfully adapted to Scotland, was to produce the ideology of the Literary Renaissance. The universal archetypes evoked all over Europe, were given Scottish embodiments. The figure of the saviour, of the leader, or the martyr for humanity, for his race, or for the working-classes, so common in the 1930's (sometimes with unfortunate results, like the workshop of the "Führer"), comes up in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's novel *Spartacus* (1933) and in MacDiarmid's "Hymns to Lenin" (1931-2), and they are explicitly compared to Bonnie Prince Charlie by the novelist Naomi Mitchison. Fionn MacColla's radical novels are born out of a Catholic (he was a convert) and Gaelic consciousness, and they try to explain the unhappy plight of the Celt throughout history, showing the characteristic revulsion against Scottish Calvinism. On a more satirical vein, the novelist Eric Linklater incorporates the myth of Don Juan (with Byron in mind) to stand for the Quixotic Scottish cavalier travelling to modern America, and the provincial Scot, "Magnus Merriman", trying his hand at nationalistic politics, and failing. Linklater is perhaps best remembered as a comic novelist who provided the anti-heroes as counterparts of so many heroes, but, like the rest of his generation, he took an interest in both popular history (he wrote

biographies of "demigods" of the Scottish history such as Bonnie Prince Charlie and Mary Queen of Scots) and the historical novel. Neil Gunn began to explore the past of the Highlands in his historical novels, while Grassic Gibbon wrote about the swan-song and the final death of the Scottish rural life, where the last traces of a Golden Age of hunters had lain. All these writers were, to some extent, mythmakers; most of them held jobs of public administration, many became engaged in nationalist politics, and all of them (except Grassic Gibbon) were bitterly disappointed at the failures of Scottish nationalism in gaining enough public support.

Then in 1936 Edwin Muir pronounced an indictment on the Scottish writer in his book *Scott and Scotland*. Here Muir pictured the Scottish people as divided between their Scottish feelings and their English thoughts, a division made by history, which it was too late to solve by resurrecting the Scots language of the 15th century, as MacDiarmid was doing in his poems. The ever spirited Hugh MacDiarmid couldn't allow this defeatism, and he quarrelled with his old friend. This was perhaps a new version of the old divisions among the Scottish people. Muir and MacDiarmid couldn't be hoped to understand each other, because apart from their opposite temperaments, Muir came from the Northern islands, where Norse culture had been the most influential, whereas MacDiarmid came from the Anglo-Scottish border.

In spite of these differences of character, Edwin Muir was as interested as MacDiarmid in mythology. Like Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Muir believed in a kind of Golden Age, or "Eden", previous to civilization. He absorbed Jung's theories of the collective unconscious and professed a faith in the inherited experience. So did Neil Gunn, who continued to recreate the mysteries of the Highlands and to make wide use of archetypes in his highly symbolical novels, until the 1950's. The most

representative Scottish writers were still motivated by the study of the new and old mythologies of their land, when a second wave of the Renaissance occurred in the mid-twentieth century. This Renaissance coincided, again, with a revival of the Scottish National Party, after the Second World War. It produced novelists such as Robin Jenkins, who in *The Thistle and the Grail* (1954) - the Grail is none other than the cup of football championship-, examines this sport as a surrogate for religion. In 1961 another novelist, James Kennaway, published *Household Ghosts*, wherein the main character suddenly realizes that he is, in his real life, playing the old game of Mary Queen of Scots and John Knox with his girl friend. This is the true nature of Scottish ghosts that Kennaway wants to show in his novel: they consist in the persistence of mythologized history in the Scottish mind.

By 1969 an outstanding poet, Norman MacCaig, was still lamenting the historic betrayal of the Clearances in "A man in Assynt: A poem for television" (included in *A Man in My Position*), an elegy on the delerict landscape that his ancestors had inhabited, and that was ruined by English businessmen and the indifference / of a remote and ignorant government... (King 1971: 101). However, the latest tragedy in the history of Scotland took place after the prosperous 1960's, when oil was discovered in the North Sea. "It is Scotland oil!", was the cry of the nationalists (Watson 1977: 328). For other Scots, like George Mackay Brown, poet and story-teller of the Northern islands, it meant the coup-de-grace against the old ways of life that had been preserved in his Orkney islands: the victory of the many-headed monster Progress, whose earliest blow against natural life (that is, the orderly ritual of the seasons, broken by the irruption of historical change) had been the Reformation. Destruction by Progress in the form of speculation provides the realistic background of his most popular novel, *Greenvoe*, an otherwise deeply symbolic work. Although

Brown's books deal with universal human concerns, they use the history of his land as their basic material, so that perhaps they were initially benefited by a fresh effervescence in Scottish nationalism, which, as ever before, got some impulse from literature, from the re-telling of the "auld songs", although probably less than in the 50's, and even much less than in the 30's. In 1973 John MacGrath and his Scottish 7:84 Theatre Company toured Scotland with their tragi-comedy of Scottish history, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, where they joined music hall sketches, songs, jokes, anecdotes and plain political propaganda to remind their acclaiming audiences of the iniquities of the Highland Clearances. This general outburst of nationalism in the 70's failed to reach its final aims at the referendum of 1979, where only 33 per cent of the total British electorate voted 'yes' to Scottish devolution. Although this result has been regarded as unfair by some (for only the Scots should have been allowed to vote), and this decentralization still seems a necessary issue, since Scotland remains a country with distinct law, social problems and political tendencies, maybe some of the Scottish nationalists, among whom there are so often the artists, have come to the sad realization that the old sovereign Scottish nation, today, is the dream of a few dreamers: those who are able to see the ghosts inhabiting the empty Highlands; it is, in other words, a mythology well preserved in the rich literature that it stimulates. From the earliest epic fragments, which celebrate the defeats inflicted on Edward I during the Wars of Independence (circa 1296), to *Lanark* (1981), a magnificent post-modernist novel about real and imaginary life in Glasgow, the literature of Scotland has evolved in many different ways, but it is still one of the best ways to approach the Scottish reality, with its characteristic presence of the past, and its blend of myth and history.

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